



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

The Republic of Tajikistan (Tojikiston) covers 55,251 square miles (143,100 square kilometers) and is slightly smaller than Wisconsin. Most of the land is mountainous and crossed by jagged peaks, the highest of which rises to 25,548 feet (7,787 meters). Minerals and hydroelectric power, Tajikistan's most abundant natural resources, are found in the Tien Shan and Pamir mountains, the highest ranges in central Asia. Among the animals found in the cold, desolate land of the Pamirs are the world's largest bears, cattle (the yak), and sheep (the Marco Polo).

Tajikistan's climate varies considerably according to altitude. In northern lowlands, the average temperature in January is 30°F (-1°C) and in July is 81°F (27°C). Temperature variation in southern lowlands is extreme, with summers as hot as 120°F (50°C). Mountain winter temperatures are often as low as -50°F (-45°C). Rainfall is moderate in the valleys. Heavy snow closes mountain passes five months of the year.

History

Tajik history dates as far back as 2100 BC, when the Amu Darya and Syr Darya river systems gave rise to an advanced civilization. The ancestors of modern Tajiks include these peoples as well as the east Iranians who inhabited the Persian Empire's tributary states of Bactria and Sogdiana in the sixth and seventh centuries BC. In 329 BC, Alexander the Great founded Alexander-the-Farthest, the present-day city of

Khojand. Arab invaders came in the seventh century. During the ensuing centuries, this area was part of a much larger territory later referred to as Turkestan, an affluent center of world trade. Caravans loaded with silk and spices from China and India followed the Silk Road on their way to Europe and Asia Minor. The trade route brought with it many conquerors, including Mongol leader Ghengis Khan.

The Tajiks developed an impressive culture, which often adopted the knowledge of these invaders. The magnificent ruins at Bukhara and Samarkand (both now in Uzbekistan) are products of Tajik culture, and Tajiks have made important contributions to Persian literature for more than nine hundred years. The Chinese taught the Tajiks to dig wells and use iron; the Romans introduced glassmaking. Also, many domesticated plants, such as the pea and wheat, have their origin in the area of Tajikistan.

In the 15th century, feuding tribes, economic decay, and the discovery of a seaway trade route led to a collapse of trade along the Silk Road. Tajiks were dominated by neighboring Afghans from the mid-1700s until the 1860s, when Russia gained control. The entire region became subject to the Great Game between competing British and Russian Empires. Russia attempted to absorb the Tajik region after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, and a resistance war raged between 1918 and 1926. The rebellion was defeated by the superior Russian troops, and Tajikistan became a Soviet republic in 1929. The Soviets proceeded to collectivize agriculture and accelerate industrialization to link the economy to other republics. Contact with other nations was severely restricted.

Anti-Soviet sentiment was never far from the surface, and in the late 1980s, Tajik protests became more vocal and even

violent. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Tajikistan declared independence and became a founding member of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In 1992, a clan-based power struggle erupted into civil war. Tens of thousands died, and about one million people were displaced by fighting between factions of the Soviet-era power elite and an opposing coalition of Islamists and liberals. The secular government and the mostly Islamic opposition reached a peace agreement in 1997, under which President Emomali Rahmon remained chief of state.

Rahmon was reelected in 1999 with 96 percent of the vote. In June 2003, voters approved a referendum that amended the constitution to allow Rahmon to run for two additional seven-year terms at the conclusion of his term in 2006. Although 93 percent of voters were reported to have approved the amendment, the opposition claimed that the measure was hidden among dozens of other amendments in the referendum and that voters were largely unaware of the extension provision. Tajikistan's three main opposition parties boycotted the 2006 presidential election. Rahmon won with more than 76 percent of the vote, though international observers condemned the election for voting irregularities.

In 2008, Tajikistan faced one of its coldest winters in years coupled with an energy crisis. In April of that year, it was asked to repay a US\$47 million loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after the IMF learned that Tajikistan had applied for the loan with falsified data. In an effort to solve some of its financial problems, Tajikistan agreed to allow the U.S. military to transport non-military supplies across its territory to U.S. troops in Afghanistan. It continues to struggle, however, to pay for basic necessities, such as fuel from neighboring Uzbekistan. International observers noted that the 2010 parliamentary elections were rife with fraud.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Tajikistan's population of nearly 7.5 million is growing at an annual rate of 1.9 percent. Some 80 percent are ethnic Tajiks, 15 percent are Uzbeks, and 1 percent are Russians. Russians once formed more than 8 percent of the population, but most returned to Russia following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Small groups of Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and other nationalities also live in Tajikistan. Only about 26 percent of Tajikistan's population lives in urban areas. Uzbeks are more commonly found in the southwest and west, while Russians live in larger towns and the capital of Dushanbe. Ethnic Pamiris live on the world's highest inhabited plateau, a 14,000-foot (4,267-meter) table in the Pamir Mountains, characterized by barren peaks, deep valleys, and a lack of vegetation. The Pamiris are divided into smaller groups according to their spoken dialects, including the Shugnani, Wakhi, Darwazi, and Yazgulami.

Language

In 1989, *Tojiki* (Tajik) replaced Russian as the official language, and its everyday use is becoming more prevalent. Tajik belongs to the southwest Iranian group of languages and is closely related to Farsi, or Persian. Each region has its own

dialect and accent. Although there are variations in sounds and vocabulary, these dialects are mutually intelligible among Tajiks. In the eastern Badakhshoni Kuhu Autonomous Region, people speak Pamiri, which belongs to the eastern Iranian language group. Uzbek, too, is spoken by many people.

Traditionally, these languages were written in Arabic script, but Cyrillic script has been used since 1940. Although some Tajiks would like to see a return to the Arabic script, it remains too costly for the young country to change its textbooks. Russian is still taught in many schools, especially at the university level, and many urban dwellers are more comfortable with it than with Tajik. Russian is the primary language of communication between ethnic groups.

Religion

Most Tajiks and ethnic Uzbeks are Sunni Muslims. The Pamiris are mostly members of the Isma'ili (Shi'i Muslim) sect. Their leader is the Aga Khan, whose foundation helps to combat poverty and illiteracy in the region. Russian Orthodox and other Christian churches are also represented, and there is a small Jewish community. Islam in Tajikistan features elements of Sufi mysticism and shamanism. Because Tajikistan was a stronghold of Islamic resistance to communist rule, the Soviets isolated Tajiks from extensive contact with Iran and Afghanistan. In more recent years, many Tajiks again joined Islamic opposition movements, although they were motivated more by politics than by religious devotion. The flow of community life, especially in rural areas, centers on the village mosque. Daily prayers, local celebrations, festivals, and feasts involve the mosque. The *mullo* (cleric) is a leader in the village and is supported by villagers. People take great pride in having a nice mosque. Since independence, more emphasis has been placed on the study of the *Qur'an* and of Persian, celebration of religious holidays, and use of the Arabic script. The *ozodii zanon* (freedom for women) and use of alcohol campaigns have left their marks, as women are not required to comply with certain traditional Islamic restrictions and alcohol is consumed.

General Attitudes

Tajiks have a well-deserved reputation for hospitality. To their friends they are kind, gentle, and unfailingly generous. Tajiks feel a kinship with extended family and others from the same town or region and often fear or despise those from other areas. Local leadership is maintained by powerful warlords, around whom cults of personality develop. Accordingly, a Tajik is an enemy to fear but a friend to cherish.

Characteristics much admired in Tajikistan include being willing to share, helping others, and caring for those who are alone. Although Tajiks are generally reserved, they always welcome a social gathering or party, especially for special events such as weddings and birthdays. Personal aspirations differ: some people may seek a good education abroad while others desire their own plot of farmland.

Personal Appearance

Most urban men wear Western-style clothing to work. Some still wear a four-cornered or a round hat called a *toqi* or *tupi*,

which are regionally distinctive in color and design. Women commonly wear colorful traditional Tajik dresses (*curta*) with long, contrasting-colored pants (*aezor* or *pajomah*) underneath; many wear scarves on their heads. Quite typically, women wear earrings and necklaces. Rural women dress more conservatively; they wear a *farangi* (head covering), sometimes using it to veil their faces when men approach. Village men, especially elders, wear a long coat called a *joma* or *chapan* that is kept closed with a bandana-type tie (*meeyonband* or *chorsi*) around the waist. They may also wear a man's *curta*. Traditionally, adults do not wear shorts. Revealing clothing is considered offensive. Schoolchildren are required to wear uniforms.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Men commonly greet each other by shaking hands, whereas women either embrace or shake hands. Tajiks may also place the right hand over the heart before, during, or after a handshake. Friends who have not seen each other for some time may embrace and kiss each other three times on opposite cheeks. Urban men and women may greet each other with a handshake, but rural men usually do not touch women in public, greeting verbally instead. The standard greeting is the Arabic *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you); the reply is *Wa 'alaykum al-salām* (And peace also with you). Close friends might simply exchange *Salom* (Tajik for "Peace"). A common Tajik greeting is *Chee khel shoomo?* (How are you?); the Uzbek equivalent is *Yakhshi me seez?* Russian speakers often greet friends by asking *Kak dela?* (How are things?). Upon parting, Tajiks say *Khayr* (Good-bye) or *To didana* (See you later). When addressing elders and those in high positions, one uses titles and given names or surnames. Friends use nicknames and given names. Very important persons visiting a rural village may receive a formal greeting that includes the offering of bread and salt, followed by speeches.

Gestures

In rural homes, people usually sit on the floor cross-legged or with legs tucked under and to the side. It is considered improper to point the bottom of one's shoe or foot at another person. Pointing directly at someone or beckoning with one finger is considered rude; one uses the entire hand instead. Respect is shown by looking down while speaking to someone. People usually pass items with the right hand; the left hand is placed on the heart or supports the right arm.

Visiting

Socializing in the home or at a large hall for weddings, memorials, or birthdays is an important aspect of Tajik society. Meals for these occasions can last for hours and involve several courses; dancing often follows.

The traditional house includes a special room set aside for entertaining; on some occasions only men gather here, while for other occasions men and women socialize together. It is customary to remove shoes before entering and to sit on

kurpacha (thick cushions) spread on the floor. Men sit cross-legged. Women sit with both legs tucked under and to the side. Hosts usually offer tea to their guests, as well as fruit and nuts. Whether it is mealtime or not, food is cooked for visitors. The most common days for visiting are Saturday and Sunday, although anytime will do. Relatives commonly visit one another; daughters visit their mothers especially frequently.

Eating

Most Tajiks eat with their fingers at traditional meals and in rural areas, although utensils are more common in cities. Three meals are customary in the cities, while some rural people eat only breakfast and supper. Breakfast (*nonishta*) usually includes a cup of tea (*choi*). Families eat together on the floor, with food placed on a low table or a cloth. At traditional meals, food is served in communal dishes shared by those sitting close by. At some special occasions, food is served on platters and guests prepare their own plates. Bread, leavened or unleavened (*non*), is served at all meals. Guests are expected to eat at least a little; it is polite to eat as much as possible. Although most Tajiks are Muslims, alcohol (usually vodka) is served for special occasions. It is common for everyone around the table to take turns making toasts. Many Tajiks observe the fast during *Ramazon*, the month in which Muslims believe *Allah* (God) revealed the *Qur'an* to the prophet Muhammad. During this month, Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. They break the daily dawn-to-dusk fast with an evening meal. After all meals, one holds the hands cupped at chest level while grace is said. Upon conclusion of the prayer, one runs the hands down the sides of the face and wipes them together.

LIFESTYLE

Family

The *oilai kalon* (extended family) is the center of Tajik society. Tajiks know the general kin ties of everyone else in a rural village and use this information as a behavioral guide. Because one shares character and reputation with one's relatives, one is also bound to share material goods. Rural households usually contain several generations. The elderly receive respect and care from their children and often help care for their grandchildren and teach them how to behave in culturally required ways. In these large families, work is divided by gender and age. Women and girls cook, wash, garden, care for children, help work in the fields, produce cheese and other milk products, and process foods to store for winter. Men and boys work in the fields and take care of the family livestock. Urban families are smaller, often live in apartments, and have more evenly divided chores. All family decisions are finalized by the elders. Mothers are the main disciplinarians, although fathers take action in the case of severe punishment. As men grow older, they tend to spend more time involved in community discussions in mosques and teahouses.

Housing

In rural areas, an extended family typically lives in a mud-brick structure of several rooms. A high mud wall provides security and keep animals and gardens secure. Within such compounds (*havli*), it is common to find three or four houses led by the senior male. These compounds are also found cities, but the structures are built of brick covered with cement. Also typical in urban areas are Soviet-era apartment blocks made of prefabricated concrete. Apartments usually consist of one to three rooms plus a toilet, separate bath, and small kitchen. The type of furnishings depends on the income of the family, but the living room usually has a wood and glass cupboard to display photos, souvenirs, and family mementos as well as cutlery and glasses. Urban homes typically have one electrical outlet and one main light source per room, while rural homes must share power with several households. Running water exists in urban areas, but water from the tap must be filtered and boiled before being safe for household use. A lack of water pressure often leaves residents of upper floors with little or no water, so many families use a large plastic trash can to store a water supply.

Dating and Marriage

It is not normal for members of the opposite sex to show affection in public, and in rural areas there is no opportunity for dating. Urban teenagers do attend movies and other events in mixed groups but not as couples.

Some weddings are quietly arranged several years in advance by the families involved. Teenage girls sometimes agree to become a second or third wife. Allowed by Islam, but illegal under secular law, such marriages are tolerated because they relieve economic strain on the girls' families.

June through September is considered the wedding season. Families often compete to provide the best and most food for as large a wedding celebration as possible. The extravagant events serve as a social highlight for the community but often deplete the family's resources. The wedding takes place over three days. The first portion is a religious ceremony performed by a *mullo* and witnessed by the community. The couple later registers the marriage with the civic authorities and visits historical sites with the wedding party. The event ends with a wedding dinner consisting of abundant food and dancing.

Life Cycle

When an infant is born to Tajik, Uzbek, and other Muslim families, a celebration is held at which the *mullo* formally welcomes the child into the community. Russians generally have the baby baptized within a few days after birth. At the age of 10 or 11, Tajik boys are circumcised, and the family invites close friends and relatives to celebrate this initiation into manhood. Funerals are costly, as families of the deceased hold an open house for two or three days, providing food to anyone who wishes to honor the deceased. Visitors donate money to help offset the funeral expenses, and the *mullo* says prayers for the deceased on behalf of those who have visited. The event is typically attended by the entire community.

Diet

The Tajik diet is comprised of vegetables (potatoes, cucumbers, carrots, peppers, squash), fruits (especially grapes, melons, tomatoes, and apples), and meats (beef, mutton, chicken) together with *non*. *Non* is typically prepared in a clay oven (*tandor*). A favorite dish is *palav* (rice mixed with meat and carrots). Skewered meat (*shashlik*) is popular, as are pasta dishes (*mantu*) filled with various meats or squash.

Many people eat yogurt and other dairy products. Puddings and pies are common urban desserts. A traditional Tajik sweet dish is *halvo* (paste of sugar and oil). Nuts and dried fruits (raisins, apricots) are served as snacks. Meals are followed by black or green tea. Tajikistan's urban residents enjoy a more varied diet than people in rural areas.

Recreation

Popular sports include soccer, basketball, tennis, and volleyball. Men play *buzkashi* to celebrate the birth or circumcision of a son. In this rough polo-type game, teams of horsemen try to carry a goat carcass from one spot through a set of poles and back again. Players not in possession of the animal struggle to get it away from the man who has it; great horsemanship is required. Many urban residents watch television or go to movies. Radio broadcasts are popular in rural areas. Popular summer activities include swimming in rivers and man-made lakes and having picnics around Dushanbe.

The Arts

While Tajiks enjoy local arts, they also consider regional and Islamic arts a part of their heritage. Operas and concerts are performed in Dushanbe. In rural areas, the singing of *epos* (historical or legendary poems) is a common pastime. A rich oral literature has allowed Tajik poems and stories to be passed down for generations. Tajiks love dancing; special occasions include either a live band or music from tapes. Crafts such as jewelry, embroidery, ornamental paintings, pottery, and wood carvings flourished particularly before communist rule. These arts declined for decades and have not yet been fully revived.

Holidays

National public holidays in Tajikistan include New Year's Day, *Id-i-Ramazon* (feast at the end of *Ramazon*), International Women's Day (8 Mar.), *Id-i-Navruz* (Islamic New Year), Victory Day (9 May, for World War II), *Id-i-Qurbon* (Feast of the Sacrifice, honoring Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son), Independence Day (9 Sept.), and Constitution Day (6 Nov.).

SOCIETY

Government

The president (currently Emomali Rahmon) is head of state and holds most executive authority. The prime minister (currently Oqil Oqilov) is head of government and is responsible for the economy and infrastructure. Legislative

power is vested in the parliament (*Majlisi Oli*), which is divided into an upper chamber (*Majlisi Milli*) and a lower chamber (*Majlisi Namoyandogon*). The upper chamber has 34 members (25 selected by local leaders, 8 appointed by the president, and 1 filled by the former president). The lower chamber has 63 elected members. Opposition parties have very little power or influence in government. The voting age is 18. Tajikistan is divided into three administrative regions, the largest of which (containing half the territory but less than 3 percent of the population) is the Autonomous Region of Badakhshoni Kuhi.

Economy

The poorest of the former Soviet republics, Tajikistan is also one of the most rural; 67 percent of its people work in agriculture. Minerals (gold, iron, lead, mercury, bauxite, tin) and hydroelectric power from the mountains, together with cotton, silk, fruits, and vegetables, form the foundation of the economy. Unfortunately, the economy has suffered from civil war and the loss of Soviet-era trade and supply links. Political instability made it nearly impossible to implement serious market reform after independence, although the government has worked to privatize small state businesses. The government has sought increased economic cooperation and trade with its major trading partner, Russia. However, the 2008 global financial crisis hurt Tajikistan's exports and decreased remittances from abroad. The drug trade disrupts growth as it becomes more violent, attracts more labor, and addicts more young people. In 2000, the government changed the currency from the Tajik *ruble* to the *somoni* (TJS).

Transportation and Communications

Rural transportation needs are met primarily by walking or by riding tractors, horses, or donkeys. Only a very small number of trucks and private cars travel the deteriorating roads in isolated areas. Buses run between major towns, and some areas are connected by train. Urban residents use electric trolleys and buses, and sometimes taxis and minibuses. A small government airline flies to otherwise inaccessible areas.

Most large urban areas have extensive phone networks, but service is unreliable. Rural areas lack proper phone access. Most people have televisions and radios. Several state-run television stations operate in Tajikistan. Radio stations are both state-run and privately owned. Programs are broadcast in Russian, Tajik, and Uzbek. Newspapers also print in these languages. The press is subject to government restrictions.

Education

An unstable economy has brought disarray to all levels of education. Primary school enrollment is down, as fees have been introduced and schools are no longer heated in the winter. Textbooks in rural areas are scarce, as are teachers (many fled during the war). The number of students in secondary schools has remained steady, with a slight increase in schools conducted in Tajik (as opposed to Russian). Several universities and institutes, as well as various technical and vocational schools, provide post-secondary education.

Health

Dispensaries staffed by paramedics and midwives are located in almost all rural villages, and there are hospitals or clinics in each district capital. Still, overall health care in Tajikistan is deteriorating. There is a severe shortage of trained medical personnel. Generally, the emphasis is on treatment and hospitalization rather than prevention. Hospitals are poorly supplied. International organizations are trying to fill the void. Due to poor prenatal care, poor sanitation, poverty, and the emigration of medical specialists, Tajikistan faces extremely high infant and maternal mortality rates. Tuberculosis endangers many, especially in rural areas.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Tajikistan, 1005 New Hampshire Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20037; phone (202) 223-6090; web site www.tjus.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	7,487,489 (rank=95)
Area, sq. mi.	55,251 (rank=95)
Area, sq. km.	143,100

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	112 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	65 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$1,900
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	40 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	62 (male); 69 (female)

*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).