



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Turkmenistan lies at the heart of central Asia. Covering 188,460 square miles (488,100 square kilometers), the country is bigger than California but smaller than Texas. Ninety percent of Turkmenistan is taken up by the largely uninhabited Garagum and Gyzylgum deserts. Turkmenistan is divided into five *wilayets*, or regions: Ahal, Lebap, Mary, Balkan, and Dashouz. The capital, Ashgabat, is located a few miles north of the Koepetdag mountain range, which forms the border with Iran. The other major cities are Türkmenbashi (formerly Krasnovodsk), in the west, and Turkmenabad (formerly Chärjew), in the east.

Turkmenistan has a subtropical desert climate with extreme variations in temperature. In the summer, temperatures in the open desert frequently exceed 131°F (55°C), while in the winter they often plunge well below freezing. Spring and fall are generally mild and pleasant.

History

Turkmen trace their origin back to the Oguz people, a confederation of Turkic tribes who took their name from the leader Oguz Kahn. Possibly with their conversion to Islam, they took on the name “Turkmen,” meaning “pure Turk” or “most Turk-line of the Turks.” They settled in their present location in the 11th century. Over the years, the Turkmen tribes defended themselves against attacks from outside forces, including the Mongols in the 13th century and neighboring Persians and Uzbeks between the 15th and 18th

centuries. Known for their magnificent horsemanship and bow-and-arrow skills, the Turkmen frequently went on the attack themselves, making invasions into territories as far away as the Byzantine Empire.

Relying on tribal leadership, the Turkmen governed themselves through a well-defined hierarchy, where *maslahats* (meetings) were convened and decisions made by *aksakals* (“white-bearded” elders). However, the tribes did not fully unite until, under the pressure of Persian and Russian encroachments, they joined forces under local leaders. The Turkmen initially managed to hold off a 19th century Russian invasion, but in 1881 they were defeated decisively at the Battle of Gok Depe. Thousands of Turkmen were slaughtered, and by 1885 the whole territory of present-day Turkmenistan was incorporated into the Russian Empire.

Following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia in 1917, pockets of Turkmen resistance emerged, some in cooperation with the Bolshevik Army's counterrevolutionary opponents, the White Army. By 1920, they had been defeated by the Bolsheviks, but small bands of fighters, *basmachis*, continued to resist the Soviets into the 1930s. The boundaries for the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic were drawn up in 1924. From then until 1991, the country was led by the chairmen of the Turkmen Republican Soviet, who was appointed by and answered to Moscow.

On 27 October 1991, prior to the Soviet Union's collapse, Turkmenistan became an independent country. Turkmenistan joined the United Nations in 1992. Saparmyrat Niyazov, who had been chairman of the Turkmen Soviet since 1985, became Turkmenistan's first president upon independence. Niyazov

established a strict authoritarian regime and an elaborate cult of personality. Portraits and statues of him were ubiquitous, grandiose public projects took priority over economic development, and no dissent was tolerated. A 1994 referendum extended Niyazov's term for five years without the need for an election, and in 1999, Parliament made him president for life. Niyazov died of heart failure in December 2006. Niyazov's deputy prime minister, Kurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, succeeded him as president following elections in February 2007. The change in regime was marked by an elimination of the calendar used by the old regime, and the removal of some gold-plated statues of Niyazov from prominent locations.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Turkmenistan's population of about 4.9 million is growing at an annual rate of 1.1 percent. The population is composed of ethnic Turkmen (85 percent), Uzbeks (5 percent), Russians (4 percent), and small populations of Kazakhs, Kurds, Jews, Ukrainians, and Azerbaijanis. The five largest tribes are the Teke, Yomud, Ersary, Gokleng, and Saryk; tribal carpet patterns are represented in the Turkmen flag. Ashgabat is Turkmenistan's largest and most densely populated city. Even there, many Turkmen continue to preserve traditional ways of life. It is not uncommon to see camels and sheep being raised in courtyards next to homes. The Turkmen population is young, with 29 percent under the age of 15 and only 4 percent over age 65.

Language

The official language of Turkmenistan is Turkmen, although Russian is still used in the capital city. Turkmen is a Turkic dialect, most similar to those spoken in Turkey and Azerbaijan. Historically, the Central Asian languages have borrowed from each other a good deal. With the introduction of Islam, Arabic and Persian terms entered the languages. The 18th century poet Magtumguly, who wrote in the vernacular dialect, is credited with promoting a distinct Turkmen literary language, which reduced the number of Arabic and Persian terms. However, throughout the Soviet period, official business, education, medicine, and science were conducted almost exclusively in Russian. Since independence, the Turkmen government and the Turkmen Language and Literature Institute have combated this trend by replacing Russian-based terms with Turkmen words and Russian bureaucrats with indigenous Turkmen.

The alphabet has also changed with political shifts. The Turks' original runic script gave way to a Perso-Arabic script with the adoption of Islam. In 1928, in the spirit of Soviet cultural development, Turkmen and other Soviet Muslims adopted an "internationally oriented" Latin-based script, a symbol for the Soviets of the international spread of socialism. Then in 1940, a push toward greater "Sovietization" was marked by the widespread introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet. Then-president Niyazov declared a return to a Latin-based script in 1993, in part to signify the

break from Soviet domination and in part to give Turkmen greater access to technology and the Western world.

Religion

Although post-Soviet Turkmenistan is a Muslim state, institutional religion has never been strong among the historically nomadic Turkmen, who have a long tradition of praying in their homes. Turkmen have preserved their old traditions to a remarkable extent, fusing pre-Islamic customs with their Islamic practices. For example, Turkmen say *Bismillah* (a Muslim blessing meaning "In the name of God") before beginning any task and tie a pre-Islamic *alaja* (a woven camel-hair talisman) to the steering wheel of their cars for good luck. Random misfortunes are frequently attributed to the evil eye (a glance believed to be capable of inflicting a harmful curse). Certain plants and bread are used as antidotes to evil. A mother might place a piece of bread under the pillow of a child afflicted with bad dreams.

The Soviet government outlawed many religious ceremonies, forcing the Turkmen to practice them in secret. Many have reemerged since independence, and the government now encourages the celebration of religious holidays and pilgrimages to holy sites. Muslims constitute 89 percent of the population, and there are small representations of Eastern Orthodox (9 percent) and Jews.

General Attitudes

An essential component of Turkmen social behavior is *edep*, which refers to politeness, graciousness, modesty, hospitality, respect toward elders and guests, and responsibility toward family. Some schools include *edep* in their curriculum. Turkmen have a great sense of duty to their family (especially elders) and community. They value the well-being of family and community groups over the well-being of the individual, and they depend on networks of relatives, friends, and acquaintances for assistance.

Personal Appearance

Turkmen still wear their centuries-old, brightly-colored style of dress. Women wear long, loose-fitting dresses with hand-embroidered collars (*yaka*). Most wear long hair under dramatically patterned headscarves, which are both fashionable and indicative of tribal affiliation. Men more frequently dress in Western styles, but *dons* (robes), *telpeks* (sheep fur hats), and *tahyars* (embroidered skullcaps) can still be seen.

Shoes are kept polished, hair is tidy, and nails are regularly trimmed. Turkmen have significantly fewer articles of clothing than most Westerners and so tend to wear them on consecutive days. Among the younger generation of Turkmen, there is a growing trend toward Western-style dress. Russian and, more recently, Turkish imports are worn instead of, or sometimes mixed with, traditional wear. Though considered immodest by most Turkmen, revealing items such as mini-skirts are occasionally worn.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Turkmen greetings combine the Muslim *Al-salām* ‘*alaykum* or *Salām* ‘*alayk* (meaning “May peace be upon you,” generally shortened to *Salam*, meaning “Peace”) with the traditional Turkmen *Nahili sen? Gowy my?* (How are you? Well?). A typical response is *Howa, yakshi Hudaya shukur* or *Howa, gowy Allaha shukur* (both meaning “Yes, thank God”). Women may kiss or press hands with other women but not with men. Men extend and press together their right hands, with the younger lightly grasping the elder’s right forearm. Children are expected to initiate greetings with elders.

Family terms are used beyond the family to show respect. *Kaka* (father) is added to an elder male relative's name; senior acquaintances are called *aga* (elder brother). Elder women may be called *hanum* (lady) by formal acquaintances or, more commonly, *daiza* (aunt) or *gelneje* (sister-in-law). *Doganym* and *jigim* (sibling) are used with equals and younger acquaintances.

Gestures

Turkmen are friendly but avoid public displays of affection. For example, at weddings and celebrations, men and women generally do not dance together. When eating, traditional Turkmen sit on the floor. While both sexes may sit cross-legged, women must take care to cover their legs. After a meal, men customarily lean on a pillow. When washing their hands, Turkmen, who value water highly, never shake water from their wet hands but rub them dry or wait for a towel. To signify “no,” it is common for Turkmen to make a “cluck” sound from the edge of the mouth.

Visiting

Guests are highly honored in Turkmen homes. Turkmen believe that it is shameful to turn away a guest, even a stranger or someone who shows up unexpectedly. Family members and neighbors do not necessarily knock and may stay for hours. Visitors traditionally bring a gift of bread, cake, or another food made from wheat; such a gift represents the staff of life. In the cities, gifts of flowers are common, always in odd numbers since even numbers are offered at funerals. An enemy enters with the left foot, so guests should always enter with the right. Turkmen always leave their shoes at the door and walk in socks or barefooted over carpets.

Turkmen drink many cups of green tea, which they offer to all guests. In rural areas, it is traditional for the host to slaughter and serve a sheep or goat for a guest. To be offered the head, and most especially the eyes, is to be paid the highest honor. Turkmen will often enquire about a visitor's age, marital status, number of children (and which one is the favorite), and salary. People are leery of discussing politics.

Eating

Turkmen eat three meals a day, usually sitting on the floor with the food spread out on a *sachak* (cloth). After meals, they drink green tea. Although it contradicts Islamic tradition,

some Turkmen also drink vodka. In accordance with Islamic tradition, Turkmen hold utensils in their right hands; knives are used only rarely as food is generally cooked in bite-size portions. Some Turkmen eat with their hands. Every meal is accompanied by bread (*chorek*), which is honored as the source of life. *Chorek* is never torn with one hand or cut with a knife, but respectfully broken with two hands; all pieces must be eaten.

During the Soviet period, Turkmen's only experience of eating out was in workplace canteens (*stolovii*) or at school cafeterias. However, restaurants and cafes, patronized primarily by expatriates and visiting businesspeople, are becoming popular.

LIFESTYLE

Family

In Turkmen families, the father is the head of the household, and other family members are expected to respect his wishes. However, the wife has substantial influence and manages household affairs. Children are supposed to obey their parents without complaint. As a sign of respect to their fathers, children avoid maintaining eye contact with them.

Turkmen families are large and maintain close ties with their relatives. Many parents continue the tradition of leaving everything to their youngest son. He is expected to live with his parents and bring his bride and children to live in their home. Later, he inherits the home and his parents' possessions. In return, he must care for his parents as they age. Most Turkmen marry young and have many children. Remaining childless is considered a tragedy, never a matter of choice.

Housing

Although many urban residents live in two- or three-bedroom apartments, Turkmen houses are usually spacious, accommodating large families. The use of furniture is increasing slowly, but most Turkmen continue to sleep on soft mattresses (*dushak*) on the floor rather than in beds, and sofas and chairs remain uncommon. During winter, the entire family may sleep together or divided by gender in one or two well-heated rooms. In summer, family members sleep outdoors on a *tapjan* (a porch raised several feet above the ground to protect them from animals). Toilets (without plumbing) are located in a separate building. Food preparation takes place in a separate room or small building. Bread is cooked outdoors in a *tamdyr* (clay oven). Turkmen carpets, which are typically red with detailed geometric patterns, cover floors, walls, and furniture. Many homes have pictures of mosques or the Muslim holy city of Makkah, Saudi Arabia, in the family room, while entranceways are adorned with dried bundles of the desert flower *yuz arlik* to ward off evil spirits.

The traditional Turkmen home, called a *yurt* or *gara oy* (black house), is still used by shepherds in rural areas. The family lives in a home in a village for part of the year, then moves to a *gara oy* in the mountains. Thick black felts cover a collapsible latticework frame, which the women erect and

dismantle. A small fire is kept indoors for cooking and heat. The smoke escapes through an opening in the roof. The animals are taken to graze during the day and brought back to a pen in evenings. They are sold for profit but also used for food. Meat is kept by salting it and hanging it along the walls.

Dating and Marriage

Most marriages are still arranged, and many brides and grooms meet only on their wedding day. Even when young people arrange a match themselves, they are unlikely to marry if their parents disapprove. Dating in the Western sense is frowned on, although it is becoming more common in Ashgabat. Turkmen marry young, generally between 19 and 25.

Usually, a young man's parents visit a girl's family to convince them that their son will be a good provider and reassure themselves that the girl comes from a family with a good record of fertility. If both sides are satisfied, they will negotiate a bride-price (*galyn*). Traditionally, the *galyn*—a mixture of money and goods—was given to the girl's family to compensate them for the loss of a housekeeper, but today the couple usually receives it. Girls bring to the marriage *oy gosh* (a collection of household goods and clothes).

Weddings have two stages: a religious ceremony followed by a civil ceremony. A large *toy* (celebration) is held after the two ceremonies, with dancing and food for as many guests as the groom's family can afford. For many, the cost of the *toy* represents a considerable part of their lifetime earnings.

In most Turkmen families, a woman becomes part of her mother-in-law's household when she marries. The success of the relationship between the two women depends largely on how hard the daughter-in-law works. After becoming part of the household, the daughter-in-law must wait until she is given permission to speak to her mother-in-law. A traditional Turkmen woman also waits for permission to speak to her father-in-law. She is expected to cover her mouth with her scarf in his presence, a custom she may also follow in the presence of her mother-in-law, husband's brothers, or elders (male or female).

Life Cycle

Turkmen rituals are based primarily on Muslim traditions. In a child's first year, his or her hair is cut by an uncle from the mother's family. A *toy* follows. A *toy* is also held for the emergence of the first tooth. Boys are circumcised at odd numbered ages, usually five or seven. When a girl marries, she traditionally begins wearing a headscarf in a manner that signifies her transition to womanhood. Because the prophet Muhammad reached age 63, a person's sixty-third birthday is celebrated, usually with the slaughter of a white sheep.

Diet

Turkmen eat a lot of meat—mainly beef, mutton, and chicken—but not pork. Bread accompanies every meal—either *chorek*, the traditional Turkmen bread cooked in an outdoor clay oven, or *khleb*, the coarser, less expensive Russian-style loaves. *Palow*, a mixture of sticky rice and meat, is the national dish and is eaten frequently at celebrations. *Chishlik* (skewered meat or fish) is cooked over

aromatic wood from the desert and eaten at picnics and on special occasions. Other popular dishes are *somsa* (fried dough pockets stuffed with meat and onions) and *mash* (green lentils cooked with rice in a stew). Fruits and nuts are plentiful but expensive; most families buy them only for a *toy* or other special occasion.

Recreation

Turkmen enjoy being with friends and family, watching television, listening to the radio, going to a state theater or concert hall, or taking walks. The more wealthy often spend summer vacations at resorts on the Caspian Sea. Sports are popular among children, and there are two sports stadiums in Ashgabat. Karate and judo, which are similar to the ancient Turkic-format wrestling, are popular, even among girls. Horseracing and soccer are particularly popular among men.

The Arts

The Turkic tradition of poetry continues to be important today. Children memorize poems celebrating Turkmenistan's independence and its president. *Dessans* mix poetry and singing to tell stories of folk heroes. Suppressed during Soviet times, *dessans*, like certain dances, are now performed in the state theaters and rebroadcast on television.

The centuries-old Turkmen art of carpet making is still a source of national pride. Turkmen carpets are found in practically every home. They serve both as a source of symbolism (patterns represent tribes and historical events) and as practical accessories (keeping the floors and walls insulated). The carpet making industry, which produces carpets for both domestic sale and worldwide export, employs thousands of people.

Holidays

Islamic holidays are celebrated according to the lunar calendar and so fall on different dates each year. They include *Agyz Acar*—a three-day holiday celebrating the end of *Ramadan*, the Muslim month of fasting—and *Gurban Bayramy*, a one-day festival commemorating Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son.

Turkmenistan's many secular holidays include Memory Day, when the tragedy of the Battle of Gok Depe is remembered (12 Jan.); Flag Day/President's Birthday (19 Feb.); International Women's Day (20 Mar.); the Day of the election of the First President (21 June); Melon Day (8 Aug.); Remembrance Day, which commemorates the victims of a 1948 earthquake (6 Oct.); and Neutrality Day (12 Dec.).

SOCIETY

Government

The president (currently Kurbanguly Berdymukhamedov) is the head of state, head of government, and commander of the armed forces. The country's one recognized political party is the Democratic Turkmen Party. The legislative branch consists of the *Majlis* (Assembly or Parliament). It is comprised of 125 members, approved by the president and elected to five-year terms. In theory, the *Majlis* has the power

to adopt and amend the constitution and other legislation, approve the budget, announce and interpret legislation, and handle other state issues. The roughly 2,500-strong People's Council (*Halk Maslahaty*) was abolished in 2008 with the adoption of a new constitution. All citizens age 18 and over are eligible to vote.

Economy

During the Soviet era, Turkmenistan's primary economic function was to supply natural gas, oil, and cotton to the other Soviet republics. The nation's transition to a globally interactive economy has been difficult, and movement toward a free-market system has been limited. However, the number of individual enterprises is growing. Cotton, oil, and above all, gas remain the mainstays of the Turkmen economy: Turkmenistan's gas is estimated as the world's fifth largest reserve, and cotton occupies nearly half of the country's irrigated land.

Until late 1993, gas and oil sales provided access to hard currency. But in 1994, Russia refused to export Turkmen gas via its pipelines to destinations outside the former Soviet Union. With the loss of this revenue source, the Turkmen economy suffered, and for the rest of the decade, the government looked for new markets for the gas. A 1999 agreement with Russia to ship over 700 billion cubic feet of natural gas annually through the Gazprom pipeline has alleviated some of the problems. Although the search for new export markets has also been hindered by the need to finance a costly new pipeline infrastructure, deals with Pakistan, Afghanistan, and China hold promise for long-term export potential. Turkmenistan's national currency is the *manat* (TMM).

Transportation and Communications

Although traffic on the roads continues to increase, most Turkmens still do not own cars. Buses and trams are numerous and reliable in the urban centers but offer only minimal services in rural areas. Official and unofficial taxis work for nominal fees. Many major cities have airports, and Turkmens can travel by air for the equivalent of a few dollars.

All Turkmen newspapers, journals, books, and brochures are published by the state. The state also sponsors all Turkmen television and radio stations. Satellite dishes that receive Turkish and Russian broadcasts are popular.

Education

Schools teach kindergarten through the ninth grade. Most students graduate from high school at age 15 and—although eligible for further education in Turkmenistan—are generally ineligible for universities abroad. Higher education is optional and no longer free (as it was in Soviet times). Although admission to universities is officially based on entrance exams, few Turkmens believe that the process is fair. The same is true of grading, where poorly paid teachers routinely accept bribes from students eager for good grades. Instruction in state schools has moved away from the Russian to the Turkmen language. Much time is devoted to the study of the *Ruhname*, former president Niyazov's thoughts on philosophy and Turkmen identity. Besides the state schools, there are a

few private Turkish elementary and high schools.

Health

The Turkmen state has transitioned from the Soviet state-sponsored free healthcare system to a subsidized one. Citizens now pay for health care, often in the form of gifts to doctors. For those who can afford it, there are some private clinics in Ashgabat with Western standards. Efforts to promote preventative medicine and educate remain largely in the realm of foreign aid agencies and non-governmental organizations.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

Embassy of Turkmenistan, 2207 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20008; phone (202) 588-1500; web site www.turkmenistanembassy.org.

POPULATION & AREA

Population	4,940,916 (rank=115)
Area, sq. mi.	188,460 (rank=53)
Area, sq. km.	488,100

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	87 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$6,700
Adult literacy rate	99% (male); 98% (female)
Infant mortality rate	44 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	65 (male); 71 (female)

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