



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

BACKGROUND

Land and Climate

Uzbekistan covers 172,740 square miles (447,400 square kilometers) in central Asia and is slightly larger than California. Mountains dominate the east. The Karakum and Kizilkum deserts are rich in gold, natural gas, and oil. The fertile Fergana Valley, located between the Tien Shan and Alay mountains, is a favorite herding destination and is home to endangered species such as the bighorn sheep and the snow leopard. Uzbekistan's continental climate is marked by long, hot summers from May to October and short, cold winters. Summer temperatures often reach above 100°F (40°C) and winter temperatures dip below 20°F (-6°C).

In its drive to produce cotton, the Soviet Union diverted the Aral Sea's primary-source rivers (Amudarya and Syrdarya) for irrigation. This and other practices severely damaged Uzbekistan's environment. Water and soil are polluted by pesticides and herbicides; soil salinity levels are too high; a once healthy fishing industry has been destroyed; and the Aral Sea has been reduced to a dead sea, unable to support the fish, animals, or humans it once did. Today, the Aral Sea covers only half of its pre-Soviet area.

History

The earliest known inhabitants of present-day Uzbekistan were the Soghdians, an agrarian people of the first millennium BC. In the late fourth century BC, Alexander the Great conquered Soghdiana and introduced Hellenic culture. He made Samarqand his capital. It, along with Bukhara and

Khiva, became important cities on the Silk Road trade route between China and Europe.

In AD 712, Arabian armies introduced Islam and Arabic. A century later, conquering Persian Samanids turned Bukhara into a center of Islamic culture. The rich Silk Road cities were well known to outsiders, and in AD 1212, Mongol warrior Ghengis Khan invaded and plundered them. The trade route recovered, and Tamerlane (Timur the Great) came to power in Samarqand in 1370. From his many successful military campaigns, he brought home spoils of war and gifted artisans to embellish his capital. His grandson Ulugbek ruled in peace and prosperity from 1409 to 1449 and made many significant contributions to astronomy.

With the discovery of ocean routes, Silk Road cities declined in importance. By the 19th century, they were divided between the khan of Khiva, the emir of Bukhara, and the khan of Kokand. These independent states soon took on a value they did not seek—strategic value to the Great Powers of Britain and Russia. Britain desired to create markets for its goods and establish a buffer zone between India and potential Russian invaders. Imperial Russia, on the other hand, sought to expand its influence, borders, and markets. Britain and Russia's struggle to control central Asia became known as the Great Game.

Russia finally prevailed, following its treaties with troops and settlers. Not long after the 1917 Russian Revolution, the new Soviet regime divided central Asia (previously called Turkestan) into five separate republics, drawing borders that cut through tribes, hunting and herding areas, and agricultural lands. Uzbekistan became a Soviet republic in 1925.

A resistance movement (called *Basmachi*) that had formed

in the Fergana Valley was crushed in 1926. The collectivization campaign of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin forced nomads and others onto collective cotton farms. Traditional farming practices and grazing patterns were ignored and most camels, yaks, and sheep died. Uzbekistan was designated a supplier of cotton, natural gas, gold, and other minerals. During World War II, Stalin sent many groups (including Meskhetian Turks from the Georgian republic) to Uzbekistan as punishment for alleged conspiracy with the Germans.

In the 1980s, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's political and economic reforms rekindled both a sense of cultural identity and ethnic tensions. Uzbeks in the Fergana Valley killed more than one hundred Meskhetian Turks in 1989. This attack and other riots prompted Gorbachev to replace the Tashkent Communist Party leader with Islam Karimov, who was officially elected president in 1990. With the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Uzbekistan declared its independence. A referendum in 1995 extended Karimov's first term until 2000, when he won reelection unopposed.

Karimov's government rules with a heavy hand to combat dissent, but violent opposition to his regime has escalated in recent years. A wave of bombings shook Tashkent in March 2004, and security forces clashed with government opponents in Andijon in May 2005. Casualty estimates vary widely, but the civil unrest is believed to have claimed hundreds of lives. The government has since imprisoned or expelled many activists. In 2007, President Karimov won another term in elections that many claimed were fraudulent.

THE PEOPLE

Population

Uzbekistan's population of 27.9 million is growing by 0.94 percent annually. Uzbeks comprise the bulk (80 percent) of the population, though Russians (6 percent), Tajiks (5 percent), Kazakhs (3 percent), Karakalpaks (3 percent), Tatars (2 percent), a small number of Koreans, and others also live in Uzbekistan. Roughly 37 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Tashkent, the capital, is home to about 10 percent of the population, and twice that number live in surrounding areas. Other large cities include Samarqand, Bukhara, Namangan, and Andijon.

Language

Uzbek is the native language of most of the population. It is a Turkic language related to Tatar. Tajik, a language related to Farsi, is spoken around Bukhara and Samarqand. About 14 percent of all people speak Russian as a native language. It is particularly common in Tashkent. Russian was the official language before 1990 and is still the language of business, government, and cross-border communication. Increasingly, local governments, businesses, and state institutions of higher education are requiring the use of Uzbek. In the 1920s, Uzbek traded its Arabic script for the Latin alphabet. In the 1930s, the Soviets universally implemented a Cyrillic script. Although the current government plans a return to a Latin alphabet, such a task will require a great deal of money (for

new texts, machines, documents) and time.

Religion

The majority (88 percent) of people in Uzbekistan are Muslims (mostly Sunni). Russians generally are Eastern Orthodox Christians. During the Soviet era, many mosques and Muslim schools were closed and torn down. Though people ceased to worship publicly, their faith was preserved through private ceremonies, traditional weddings, and so on.

Upon gaining independence, Uzbekistan lifted most restrictions on public worship. Islam slowly began gaining strength. In the decade after independence, the number of mosques grew from about 80 to more than 5,000. While many Uzbek Muslims are not active worshipers, others are embracing various (even competing) Islamic sects. People in the Fergana Valley tend to be more religious than in the rest of the country. The government, which is secular, is wary of Islamic fundamentalism and has moved to control the growth of Islam's influence.

General Attitudes

Central Asians historically have been and continue to be wary of strangers. However, tradition dictates that guests in the home be treated with utmost respect and that they be given the best a family has to offer. Even unexpected visitors are greeted warmly with *Hush Kelibsiz* (Welcome). Uzbeks are caring and open with their friends. The distinction between different kinds of friends is carefully made in syntax. The word for "friend" (*dost* in Uzbek; *droog* in Russian) indicates a very close relationship. Most Uzbeks have only three or four close friends, for whom they will do anything, and a large network of acquaintances. These connections are important in business and daily life.

In Uzbekistan, ethnicity is important to one's identity. If a person's great-great-grandparents were born in Tatarstan, even though the person has never been outside of Uzbekistan, he or she is, first and foremost, Tatar. Each ethnic group associates other ethnicities with different characteristics, both good and bad. Patriotism is evident in the pride Uzbeks show for their history, traditions, holidays, and national dishes.

Personal Appearance

Men wear Western-style suits in formal situations. Casual wear for young men consists of slacks, jeans, or jogging suits. Older men may wear *chaponlar* (long, open, quilted robes) and many men wear *dupalar* (suarish caps with a traditional design that identifies the wearer's home region). Modest dress is required even in hot weather.

Uzbek women wear skirts that cover their knees. In some regions, they often wear colorful headscarves, especially if they are married. Traditional dresses, sometimes worn every day and often on special occasions, are made of *atlas* (colorful patterned silk) and worn over baggy pants. For holidays, women also wear small caps embroidered with sequins and gold thread. Women prefer long hair; they usually wear it up but might arrange it into several small braids on holidays. Russian men and women tend to be less conservative and more Western in their choice of clothing and hairstyles.

CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

Greetings

Uzbeks generally greet each other with a series of questions about the other's well-being and family. Men shake hands with great vigor and women sometimes hug or kiss cheeks. Men often place their left hand over their heart during a handshake to express sincerity. Men usually do not make physical contact with women. A formal greeting, spoken especially by a person of lower status or age to a higher person, is *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be unto you). The proper response is *Wa 'alaykum al-salām* (And peace also unto you). Informally, greeters may exchange the shorter *Salām* (Peace). *Yakshimisiz?* (Are you well?) and *Kandaisiz?* (How are you?) are other common Uzbek greetings. Russians are more likely to greet one another with *Zdravstvuyte* and a handshake.

Uzbeks address strangers who are close to their own age as *aka* (big brother) or *opa* (big sister). *Ota* (grandfather) and *ona* (grandmother) are used for the elderly. Friends and acquaintances add these terms after one's first name. Russians usually address each other by first name. In formal situations, they add a patronymic (father's first name with the suffix *-ovich* for a son or *-ovna* for a daughter). Many Uzbeks who used this form of address during the Soviet era are dropping the suffixes but retaining their father's first name as a middle name. So, Anver Salievovich becomes *Anver Saliev*. The youth simply use first names.

Gestures

Men and women avoid public displays of affection. As a gesture of friendship, women often hook arms or hold hands in public, and men may drape their arms around each other's shoulder. Uzbeks point with the whole hand rather than just a finger. Showing or pointing the sole of the foot is impolite. It is considered unclean to eat or drink with the left hand.

Visiting

Visiting is essential to Uzbek social life. Friends may drop in any time of day. Upon entering a home, guests remove their shoes and might be provided with house slippers. Invited guests may arrive with a gift of flowers, sweets, or drinks. *Choi* (tea) is always served, usually along with some sort of snack—including *nan* (flat bread), fruits, and nuts. Visitors arriving at mealtime are invited to stay and eat. Tea usually is served before and after the meal. Long, elaborate toasts accompany the drinking of liquor. Men and women socialize together, but if a man's friends come over, the women usually dine separately and serve the men. *Choi* is extremely important. The host brings the teapot to the table and pours one cup. He ceremonially pours it back and repeats this process two more times. These three rounds signify *loi* (mud), *moi* (butter), and *choi*. The host then serves tea to guests, pouring it into small cups with the right hand and gently supporting the right elbow with the left hand. It is considered rude to pour a full cup of tea, as this means the host wishes the guest to leave.

Eating

Meals are usually a family affair. Most businesses and government offices close from 1 to 3 p.m. so people can go home for the main meal. Uzbeks serve dishes on common platters set in the middle of a low table. Individuals sit on patterned *korpacha* (mats) and lean against pillows. They eat with spoons or sometimes, when eating *palov* (a rice dish) for example, with the right hand. Russian and some urban Uzbek homes have Western-style tables. Tradition dictates that hosts repeatedly encourage guests to eat more, urging them to *Oling, oling* (Take, take). Compliments on the food are expected. *Nan* is a sacred symbol of life and is never thrown away or put on the ground. Placing *nan* facedown on the table is believed to bring bad luck. Uzbeks do not drink cold drinks or use ice cubes; cold liquids are thought to cause sore throats and stomach disorders. Previously scarce, restaurants are growing in popularity. Many still choose to eat at the more traditional outdoor *choihona* (tearoom or café). Customers remove their shoes and sit on a *suru* (raised platform with a table in the center and mats for sitting).

LIFESTYLE

Family

Uzbek families tend to be larger than Russian families, and several generations may share a household. Extended family members often live in the same town or family compound. Men are considered the head of the family, but women (usually grandmothers) make daily household decisions. Both wife and husband work outside the home. Grandchildren are often raised by grandparents. Children live at home until married, at which time the newlyweds move in with the groom's parents. Urban families may help a couple buy an apartment. The youngest married son is responsible for taking care of aging parents. His wife is the family's least senior member and, as such, does most of the housework.

Housing

Traditional rural, walled family compounds surround a common courtyard. Different buildings, animal pens, and sheds line the inside of the wall. Children do not have their own rooms, and the whole family often sleeps on mats in the same room. In the summer, everyone sleeps and eats on *surular* (platforms) in the courtyard. Urban families tend to live in Soviet-built "micro-regions" (concrete apartment complexes) that have their own shops and sometimes a small food bazaar. Some urban dwellers own a small cottage, or *dacha*, in the country, where they can relax and tend a garden.

Dating and Marriage

Traditional Uzbek girls do not date; their families arrange marriages for them. Parents begin collecting dowry items for the marriage while daughters are still young. The actual wedding may be held at a restaurant directly before the wedding party, or it may take place at a government office with just a few family members and friends present, to be followed by an evening wedding party. These expensive parties are often held in the family courtyard or in a rented

hall. On their wedding day, urban couples place flowers at various monuments in the city. At rural weddings, the couple may perform a traditional dance around a fire. The bride and groom wear elaborate *chaponlar* and *dupalar* and sit at the head table facing the *mekhmonlar* (guests). Guests dance, eat, give speeches, make toasts, and eat and dance some more. In some cases, guests “pay” dancing guests for their “performances” and the dancers pass this money on to the new couple. New brides are kept inside the groom's family compound for one month after the wedding, usually wearing traditional Uzbek attire. Russians date and choose their spouses.

Life Cycle

Within seven days of a birth, a *mullah* (Muslim religious leader) visits to read a prayer for the baby. To protect the newborn from the “evil eye,” he or she is not allowed to be seen by anyone outside the immediate family for 40 days. If the baby is a family's first child, the maternal grandparents bring clothes, a cot, a stroller, and other gifts. Because a *beshik* (traditional cradle) is among the presents, the *toy* (celebration) of the baby's arrival is called the *beshik-toy*. A boy's circumcision usually takes place sometime between infancy and age three. At a party in the boy's honor, a sheep is slaughtered, and the boy is dressed in robes adorned with gold. He is placed on a horse, and guests give him money or place it in a bag on the saddle. To save expenses, many families have the circumcision coincide with the *beshik-toy*.

Following a death, relatives and close friends gather at the home of the deceased, where the women say their goodbyes. The body is then buried in a cemetery by male relatives and friends; women do not attend. Close relatives of the deceased wear traditional Uzbek attire to the funeral. For 40 days, women cover their heads with scarves and avoid wearing jewelry and brightly colored clothes. Mourners gather on the third, seventh, twentieth, and fortieth day after the burial to hear a *mullah* read a prayer. Each Thursday during the 40-day period, male relatives read from the *Qu'ran* together.

Diet

The most important elements in the Uzbek diet are rice, potatoes, and meat (usually mutton but also beef, chicken, and rabbit). *Palov*, the national dish, generally is made with rice, meat, and carrots. *Manty* are dumplings with meat or vegetables. In the summer, bazaars are full of vegetables (eggplant, squash, cucumbers) and fruits (berries, melons, quinces, apples, pears, plums, apricots, peaches, grapes, and tomatoes). All families preserve fruits and vegetables for the winter. Many grow their own produce in gardens or on plots of land outside town.

Recreation

Soccer is the most popular sport, and almost every town has a stadium. Wrestling, boxing, and karate are also common. Boys enjoy basketball and idolize U.S. basketball stars. Girls and boys play sports in school, but traditionally Uzbek women do not participate in organized sports. On special occasions, men play traditional *koopkari*, a polo-like sport in which participants on horseback attempt to carry a sheep

carcass to a central goal without having it taken away by their competitors. Uzbeks like to watch television. Most people prefer Turkish, Latin American, and Korean soap operas and U.S. action movies. Uzbek, Turkic, Indian, and Western pop music are popular. Young people enjoy going to a movie, eating ice cream at an outdoor café, and then walking along streets in the evenings. About once a month, friends meet for a *gap*, a chance to catch up socially. A person may attend separate *gaps* with each of their social circles, such as work colleagues and school friends.

The Arts

Bright colors and symbolic shapes adorn much of Uzbek folk arts and crafts. Embroidery, especially with gold thread, is quite popular and often decorates household goods, linens, and clothing. Other crafts include wood carvings, pottery, and wall hangings. Traditional musical instruments include a *doira* (drum-like tambourine) and a *rubab* (two-string guitar). Many children learn to play instruments, sing, or dance at an early age. Instrumental ensembles usually accompany vocalists, who improvise on folk themes. Each region has its own traditional dances that depict aspects of daily life, such as picking cotton. Many ancient structures are characteristic of medieval Islamic Middle Eastern architecture. The Uzbek government encourages the preservation of historic buildings through a restoration initiative.

Holidays

The largest national holiday is *Navruz* (New Year) in the spring; the town square or park in each community becomes alive with speeches, bands, food, and booths from schools and workplaces. People continue to celebrate New Year's Eve (31 Dec.) in the Russian tradition with parties and sometimes a decorated tree. Eastern Orthodox Christians observe Christmas on 7 January. Muslim holidays are set according to the lunar calendar. Among them is a day of feasting at the end of *Ramazan*, the holy month of fasting, and *Qurban khait* (Day of Sacrifice), which honors Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son. Uzbeks observe International Women's Day (8 Mar.) by giving women and girls presents and flowers. Independence Day is 1 September.

SOCIETY

Government

Uzbekistan's president (currently Islam Karimov) is chief of state. The prime minister (currently Shavkat Mirziyayev) is head of government. The president is elected to a seven-year term and appoints the prime minister. The bicameral Supreme Assembly consists of a Senate (the upper house) and a Legislative Chamber (the lower house). In the 100-seat Senate, 84 members are elected by regional councils and 16 are appointed by the president. Members of the 150-seat Legislative Chamber are mostly elected by popular vote (15 seats are reserved for the new Ecological Movement of Uzbekistan). All Supreme Assembly members serve five-year terms. The voting age is 18. The Supreme Assembly is dominated by the People's Democratic Party (PDP, formerly

the Communist Party). Although Uzbekistan officially has a multiparty system, the PDP has been accused of harassment, censorship, and human-rights violations. International monitors have characterized previous elections as unfair.

Economy

Uzbekistan is one of the world's largest producers of cotton and gold. The country also has substantial uranium deposits. Uzbekistan's main export is cotton; fruits, vegetables, and silk make up the balance. Manufacturing focuses on cotton processors, fertilizers, and machinery for irrigation, farming, and textiles. Other industries are not well developed.

After independence, Uzbekistan tried to support inefficient state enterprises and shield consumers from the shocks of rapid economic reform. These policies eventually led to severe inflation and economic crisis. Reforms brought inflation down to manageable levels and small businesses began to grow. Larger institutions are seeking joint ventures with international corporations, though currency and trade restrictions remain too tight to encourage significant foreign investment. Falling global gold, copper, and cotton prices also hurt the economy. A lack of integration in the global economy largely shielded the Uzbek economy from the 2008 financial crisis. Yet remittances from abroad, especially Russia, decreased as a result of the downturn. The currency is the *som* (UZS).

Transportation and Communications

Most of the people in Uzbekistan travel by bus. Larger cities have trolleys and streetcars, and Tashkent has a subway. Most families own a car, although gasoline is expensive and sometimes difficult to obtain. Since public transportation tends to be overcrowded, all private cars are potential taxis; car owners pick up passengers for a fee. Official taxis are also available. Most Uzbeks can afford the cost of travel by train but usually not by air.

Telephone lines often do not extend to rural areas. However, inexpensive mobile phones are growing in popularity in these areas and throughout the country. The internet is not widely used. Connections are usually slow, and few people own their own computers. The press is government controlled.

Education

All children are required to begin school at age seven, although some attend kindergarten at five. After completing a mandatory nine years, students may choose to go to a trade school, enter a profession, or continue for three more years in preparation for university. Most students choose to continue through the eleventh grade. The government is replacing Soviet-era textbooks with textbooks reflecting Uzbek history and culture. Most teachers are women and not well paid. Teachers (instead of parents) are believed to carry the primary responsibility for a child's education. Uzbekistan has both Uzbek and Russian schools, but Russian students are required to learn Uzbek. Students must pass entrance exams for universities and technical schools.

Health

Uzbekistan has a healthcare system, but facilities lack modern equipment and medicines. Each town has at least one hospital and different specialty clinics. Hospital patients must provide their own medicine and supplies. Many prefer to treat themselves at home rather than risk catching diseases in hospitals or being treated by undertrained doctors. A few semiprivate clinics offer slightly better care at a higher price.

AT A GLANCE

Contact Information

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POPULATION & AREA

Population	27,865,738 (rank=44)
Area, sq. mi.	172,740 (rank=57)
Area, sq. km.	447,400

DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	102 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	NA
Real GDP per capita	\$2,800
Adult literacy rate	100% (male); 99% (female)
Infant mortality rate	23 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	69 (male); 75 (female)

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