

World Watch Research

Tajikistan: Background Information

September 2024



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September 2024

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Contents

Copyright and sources	1
Map of country	2
Recent history	2
Political and legal landscape	3
Religious landscape.....	6
Economic landscape.....	9
Social and cultural landscape.....	10
Technological landscape	12
Security situation	13
Christian origins	15
Church spectrum today.....	15
Further useful reports.....	16
External Links	16

Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



Tajikistan: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
10,332,000	62,600	0.6

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., World Christian Database, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

Tajikistan gained independence during the break-up of the Soviet Union on 9 September 1991 and promptly fell into a state of civil war from 1992–1997 fought between old-guard forces and Islamists loosely organized as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Other armed groups that flourished in the chaos simply reflected the breakdown of central authority rather than loyalty to a political faction. By 1997, the Tajik government and the UTO successfully negotiated a power-sharing peace accord and implemented it by 2000.

Prior to the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the civil war in Afghanistan effected border areas and threatened to destabilize Tajikistan's fragile and hard-won peace. In 1999 and 2000, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan used Tajikistan as a platform for attacks against the government of Uzbekistan. At the same time, Taliban advances in northern Afghanistan (prior to the renewed take-over in August 2021) threatened to inundate Tajikistan with thousands of refugees. A constant flow of illegal narcotics continues to transit Tajikistan from Afghanistan on its way to Russian and European markets.

In 2010, there were concerns among Tajik officials that radical Islamic militancy in the east of the country was on the rise. Fighting against militants erupted again in July 2012, and again in 2015 when Russia sent in troops to assist. In 2020/2021, the government began to [repatriate](#) Tajiks who went abroad to fight for the Islamic State group (IS) and other militant groups (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty - RFE/RL, 10 December 2020).

COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis led to great economic and social problems in Tajikistan. The government of President Rahmon possibly downplayed the impact of the pandemic: By the end of June 2022, only 125 COVID-related deaths had been officially registered. (Source: [Reuters coronavirus tracker](#), accessed 15 July 2022)

Border conflicts

On 13 March 2019, there was a border conflict with Kyrgyzstan in which a small number of villagers were killed (Source: [RFE-RL, 14 March 2019](#)). Talks were held between the Tajik and Kyrgyz presidents in July 2019, but only a few days later a new wave of violence erupted. New talks between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan were held in January 2020 (Source: [RFE-RL, 14 January 2020](#)). But, again, fresh violence broke out in May and June 2020. The relationship between the two neighbors remained strained.

Then, in 2021 and 2022, Tajikistan was affected by two serious conflicts in the region: There were regular skirmishes along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, and there was the change of government in neighboring Afghanistan.

On 2 October 2023 Kyrgyz and Tajik officials met to discuss the delimitation and demarcation of disputed border areas between the two countries, making good progress (Source: [RFE/RL, 3 October 2023](#)). On 5 December 2023, officials from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed on another 24 kilometers of the border (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 December 2023](#)). In March 2024 another agreement between the two countries was made (Source: [RFE/RL 18 March 2024](#)). Through these talks, tensions between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have eased significantly.

Tajik militants attack Moscow concert hall

On 22 March 2024 a group of 11 members of Islamic State of Khorasan attacked a concert hall near Moscow, killing about 150 people. The terrorists came from Tajikistan. This had great impact on the relationship between Tajikistan and Russia (Source: [AsiaNews, 26 March 2024](#)). It also had a great impact on the hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrant workers in Russia (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*).

Political and legal landscape

Tajikistan is a presidential republic, whereby the president is both head of state and head of government. Legislative power is vested in both the executive branch and the two chambers of parliament. Emomali Rahmon has held the office of president since 1992. President Rahmon, a former collective farm chairman, secured another seven-year term with more than 80% of the vote following presidential elections held in late 2013. Parliament is dominated by Rahmon's National Democratic Party of Tajikistan. The only legal faith-based opposition party in post-Soviet Central Asia, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), was banned in August 2015.

A law regulating religious affairs was implemented in August 2011 prohibiting all religious youthwork to citizens under 18 years of age. This had a huge impact on church activities since it is estimated that about 50% of all Christians are in this age category. In a speech on 19 March 2015, President Rahmon said his country must "be mainly focused on the development of secularism and national and secular thinking". The emphasis on secularism was aimed at the IRPT and Islamic militants fighting both in the Middle East and in Central Asia.

In January 2016 the country's Constitution was amended to enable President Rahmon to establish a presidential dynasty (Source: [RFE-RL](#), 22 January 2016).

On 1 March 2020 parliamentary elections were held in Tajikistan. As expected, President Rahmon's ruling People's Democratic Party won. It secured 47 seats in the 63-seat Majlisi Namoyandagon (Assembly of Representatives). This meant that President Rahmon and his allies retained control over parliament with its pro-presidential allies (Source: [RFE/RL, 2 March 2020](#)).

On 10 January 2018, [amendments to the law on religion](#) entered into force (World Watch Monitor, 21 February 2018). These amendments:

- allow the state to restrict manifestations of freedom of religion or belief on a wide range of grounds not permitted under international human rights obligations;
- increase religious organizations' requirements to report all their activities to the state;
- require state approval for the appointment of all imams;
- increase state control both on religious education at home, and on those travelling abroad for such education.

In the presidential elections on 11 October 2020, President Rahmon received over 90% of the votes. He has been in power since 1994. His government has two foundational aspects: Subjection to Moscow and repression of internal dissent. His son Rustam is destined to succeed him (Source: [Asia News, 13 October 2020](#)).

On 6 October 2021 Tajikistan introduced new punitive measures against the "underground" religious education of children. Deputies of the Madzhilis Namoyandagon, the lower house of parliament, approved some amendments to the penal code, according to which deprivation of liberty for up to three years is foreseen in the case of illegal religious education, including lessons given via the Internet (Source: [Asia News, 8 October 2021](#)).

According to US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Tajikistan](#)):

- "The constitution provides for the right, individually or jointly with others, to adhere to any religion or to no religion and to participate in religious customs and ceremonies. The constitution states, "Religious associations shall be separate from the state and shall not interfere in state affairs."
- "The law ... prohibits persons younger than 18 from participating in public religious activities. The government's Committee on Religion, Regulation of Traditions, Celebrations, and Ceremonies (CRA) maintains a broad mandate that includes approving registration of religious associations, construction of houses of worship, participation of children in religious education, and the dissemination of religious literature. The government maintains a list of banned extremist organizations."

- "The government subdivides associations formed for "conducting joint religious worship" into religious organizations and religious communities, which also are defined by law. To operate legally, both are required to register with the government, a process overseen by the CRA."
- "According to the law, a religious organization may provide religious education and spread religious faith. Types of religious organizations include the Islamic Center of Tajikistan (the government-supported body that oversees religious institutions belonging to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, established in law as the Republican Religious Center), central Friday mosques, central prayer houses, religious education entities, churches, and synagogues. Religious organizations are legal entities whose activities are governed by charters to which they must strictly adhere. They may be district, municipal, or national organizations."
- "According to the law, a religious community, unlike a religious organization, is not a legal entity. Its members may gather to conduct other religious activities, which are not defined by law."

According to [USCIRF Annual Report 2024 -Tajikistan Chapter](#):

- The USCIRF classified Tajikistan as 'recommended for Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)'.
• "In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained dire as the government continued to restrict and penalize the religious activity of its citizens, including those living abroad. Under the law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), the government prohibits unregistered religious activity, limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, and maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, among other actions. As in years prior, the Tajik government retaliated against persons who violated the religion law, punishing them with imprisonment, torture, fines, and harassment. While this repression impacted all religious groups, authorities particularly targeted Muslims. Notably, the government increasingly directed such actions against Ismaili Shi'a Muslims during the year."

Gender perspective

The legal landscape remains restrictive towards women and girls. Many couples marry through *nikeh* ceremonies (an Islamic religious marriage) without registering the marriage with civil registry offices. Thus, many do not benefit from the protective provisions set out in the Family Code. Child marriages, forced marriages and polygamy remain ongoing practices, despite being illegal ([Girls Not Brides Tajikistan](#), accessed 23 August 2024; [CEDAW, 2018](#)). Under the civil code both men and women have equal divorce rights, although divorces by *talaq* occur under unregistered Islamic marriages. In relation to domestic violence, the 2013 Law on the Protection of Domestic Violence (No. 954) was viewed as a positive turning point in providing protection for victims, particularly as it addressed physical, psychological, social and economic forms of violence. It fails to specifically criminalize domestic violence, however. Obtaining justice is notoriously difficult for victims, causing many to remain silent ([CEDAW, 2018](#)).

Military service is mandatory for men for two years, although an exemption can be purchased for US\$2,200 since 2021 ([World Population Review, accessed 23 August 2024](#)). Within this context, Christian men may experience physical and mental persecution as conscientious objectors if they refuse to serve in the armed forces on account of their faith ([OCHR, 21 March 2022](#)).

Religious landscape

Tajikistan: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	62,600	0.6
Muslim	10,103,000	97.8
Hindu	0	0.0
Buddhist	4,800	0.0
Ethnic religionist	7,500	0.1
Jewish	300	0.0
Bahai	4,600	0.0
Atheist	27,000	0.3
Agnostic	120,000	1.2
Other	2,200	0.0
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

According to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024) 97.8% of the population is Muslim. However, it would be wrong to call Tajikistan a Muslim country. 70 years of atheism during the Soviet era have left a deep influence and the government (the heirs of the atheist Soviets) is staunchly secular and keeps Islam firmly under strict control. The population merely follows Islamic culture rather than strict Islamic teachings. However, Tajikistan has had experience with radical Islamic groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, and hundreds of Tajiks have joined these groups, as well as going off to fight for the Islamic State group (IS) in Syria and Iraq.

According to WCD, the second largest religious category in Tajikistan is atheist/agnostic (1.4%). They can be found primarily in the capital Dushanbe and other major cities. This is the result of 70 years of forced atheism by the government of the USSR from 1917 to 1991.

Christians are a very small group; they make up only 0.6% of the population. The overwhelming majority (76.5%) of them are Russian Orthodox (i.e. ethnic Russians). As in many other countries in Central Asia, Christian numbers are shrinking due to the emigration of Russians. This is not compensated by the increase in numbers of converts to Christianity, who number about 3,000. Converts experience intense pressure from family, friends and the local community to return to the faith of their ancestors, believing that a true Tajik can only be Muslim. Female converts are vulnerable to isolation and being forcibly married to a Muslim, whereas male converts are more likely to experience physical violence and discrimination in the workplace.

On 18 December 2023 Forum 18 released its [Religious Freedom Survey](#) on Tajikistan. Serious violations documented by Forum 18 include but are not limited to:

- a climate of fear in the country;
- forcing imams in state-controlled mosques (the only sort permitted) to preach state-dictated sermons;
- the banning of Central Asia's only legal religious-based political party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the arrest as prisoners of conscience of its senior party figures;
- officials acting as if there are no legal controls on their actions;
- jailing at least 19 known prisoners of conscience for exercising their freedom of religion or belief;
- serious violations of Ismaili Muslims' freedom of religion or belief in Mountainous Badakhshan Region, including bans on meeting for prayer and the torture of relatives who put up gravestones for family members killed by the regime;
- severe limitations on the numbers of mosques permitted and activities allowed inside those mosques;
- arbitrary closures of mosques and Protestant churches;
- bans on visible signs of Islamic faith, including hijabs (headscarves) and beards;
- impunity for torture of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestants;
- restrictions in the Traditions Law on manifestations of Islam, including how funerals can be conducted;
- multiple violations of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (known as the Mandela Rules), including bans on praying, reading sacred texts, and refusals to provide necessary medical care for prisoners;
- monitoring of religious believers of all faiths, including via state-appointed imams in the state-permitted mosques;
- bans on religious communities without state permission to exist, including banning Jehovah's Witnesses and some Islamic and Protestant movements;
- strict limitations on state-permitted religious communities, including enforced detailed annual questionnaires for all non-Muslim state-permitted religious communities;
- a ban on all public exercise of freedom of religion or belief, apart from funerals, by people under the age of 18;
- forcible closure of all madrassahs (Islamic schools) and bans on religious education of under-18-year-olds and adults outside state control;
- state censorship of and bans on religious literature, bookshops, and websites;
- jailing young men who cannot perform compulsory military service on conscientious grounds, along with refusals to introduce a genuine civilian alternative service."

Tajik culture has been dominated by Islam – mainly Sunni - ever since Arab traders brought the religion to the country (in the 7th century, according to Islamic sources). Under the Soviet Union (1917-1991) Communist ideology promoted atheism, but since 1991 Tajikistan has seen a marked increase in religious practice. Since 2009, the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam is the official religion in Tajikistan. Tajikistan is the only former Soviet state with an official religion.

No religious activities beyond state-run and controlled institutions are allowed and Protestants in particular (who are regarded as "extremists", unlike Orthodox Christians) are persecuted to a significant extent. Church services are often disrupted and Christians face harassment and arrests for holding private prayer meetings or possessing 'illegal' religious material. Registering non-Orthodox, non-Catholic Christian groups is effectively impossible, making all religious activities carried out by these groups technically illegal. Even technically 'legal' religious groups (Baptists, for example) face similar persecution.

According to US State Department ([IRFR 2023 Tajikistan](#)):

- “The law defines a religious association as a voluntary association of followers of one faith, with the purpose of holding joint worship and celebration of religious ceremonies, religious education, and spreading religious beliefs. To register a religious association, a group of at least 10 persons older than 18 must obtain a certificate from local authorities confirming the adherents of their religious faith have lived in a particular local area for five years. The group must then submit to the CRA proof of the Tajik citizenship of its founders, along with their home addresses and dates of birth. The group must provide an account of its beliefs and religious practices and describe its attitudes related to education, family, and marriage. The group must specify in its charter the activities it plans to undertake, register as a religious association, and report annually on its activities or face deregistration. According to the CRA, there are 4,058 religious associations registered in the country, 66 of which are non-Muslim, including the Russian Orthodox Church and the Baha'i Faith. This number is unchanged from 2021.”

According to [USCIRF Annual Report 2024 - Tajikistan Chapter](#):

- “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in Tajikistan remained dire as the government continued to restrict and penalize the religious activity of its citizens, including those living abroad. Under the law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (religion law), the government prohibits unregistered religious activity, limits religious education, restricts the import and distribution of religious materials, and maintains discriminatory requirements for registering mosques and appointing Muslim clergy, among other actions. As in years prior, the Tajik government retaliated against persons who violated the religion law, punishing them with imprisonment, torture, fines, and harassment. While this repression impacted all religious groups, authorities particularly targeted Muslims. Notably, the government increasingly directed such actions against Ismaili Shi'a Muslims during the year.”
- “In 2023, the United Nations Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, Nazila Ghanea, and on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes, separately visited Tajikistan and noted several religious freedom violations impacting all religious groups, including specific targeting of Ismaili Shi'a Muslims, a stringent registration process for all religious organizations, and bans on women from attending mosque and all those under 18 from engaging in religious activity.”

One of the major problems for Christians in Tajikistan (and in other countries in Central Asia) is the fact that there is little cooperation and much division among the various denominations, which all plays into the hands of the government.

Economic landscape

According to [World Bank](#) data for Tajikistan (accessed 30 April 2024):

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 10.49 (in 2022)
- **GDP growth (annual %):** 8.0% (in 2022)

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and became a member of the World Trade Organization in March 2013. However, its economy continues to face major challenges, including dependence on remittances from Tajik migrant laborers working in Russia and Kazakhstan, pervasive corruption, the opium trade and destabilizing violence emanating from neighboring Afghanistan (Source: CIA Factbook). Drug trafficking is a major source of illegal income in Tajikistan as it is an important transit country for Afghan narcotics bound for Russian and European markets. Some opium is also produced locally for the domestic market.

Tajikistan lacks natural resources like ore, gold, oil and gas. Since the economy is underdeveloped, many Tajiks are forced to work abroad, above all in Russia. Without this possibility, many Tajik families would have very little money to live on. And without the money coming in from such remittances, the country's economy would break down. There are also other positive effects: While working abroad Tajiks are much more open to outreach by Christians.

The COVID-19 crisis had a big impact on the Tajik economy. Not that the country saw a huge number of infections itself, but many migrant workers in Russia could not go to work. This caused a drastic drop in the level of remittances. The deteriorating economy affects Christians just as much as the rest of the population.

According to the [World Bank Macro-Poverty Outlook Tajikistan](#) (April 2024) (accessed 30 April 2024):

- “Tajikistan's economy grew at a blistering pace of 8.3 percent in 2023, fueled by private consumption and exports of precious metals. The outlook remains robust for 2024, supported by private consumption and public investment, while precious metal exports are expected to subside. To maintain rapid growth and convergence to higher income levels, Tajikistan will need to press ahead with ambitious structural reforms that support private sector-led job creation and enhance the efficiency of public service delivery.”
- “Although Tajikistan has grown at more than 7 percent a year for the last decade, it remains the poorest country in the ECA region, with a GNI per capita of \$1,210 (Atlas method) in 2022 and 12.4 percent of households living below the LMIC poverty line.”

Gender perspective

Women have diminished chances of achieving economic independence, due to gender gaps in relation to access to education, as well as employment ([UNDP 2020, p.363](#)). Representing a positive development however, Tajikistan was among the top ten countries to report the largest gains in financial inclusion on [Georgetown's Women, Peace and Security Index 2019/20](#) (p.33).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook Tajikistan](#) (accessed 30 April 2024):

- **Main ethnic groups:** Tajik 84.3% (includes Pamiri and Yagnobi), Uzbek 13.8%, other 2% (includes Kyrgyz, Russian, Turkmen, Tatar, Arab) (2014 est.)
- **Main languages:** Tajik (official) 84.4%, Uzbek 11.9%, Kyrgyz .8%, Russian .5%, other 2.4% (2010 est.)
- **Urban population:** 28.2 % of total population (2023)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8% (male: 99.8%, female: 99.7%) (2015)

According to the [UNDP Human Development Report Tajikistan](#) (data updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.679 (0.647 for females, 0.704 for males), ranking 126 (2022)
- **Total population:** 9.95 million (2022)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 71.6 years (73.5 for females, 69.2 for males) (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 10.9 years (10.4 for females, 11.3 for males) (2022)
- **Gender Inequality index:** 0.269 (2022)
- **Labor Force Participation Rate (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 33.3, Male: 52.1 (2022)

Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country where a non-Turkic language and culture prevail. Tajik belongs to the same group of languages as Farsi (Iran) and Dari (Afghanistan), and the Tajik culture closely resembles the culture found in parts of Iran and Afghanistan. Tajiks do not draw a line between their own literature and general Persian literature, but there is a difference in writing: Farsi uses Arabic lettering, while Tajik uses the Cyrillic alphabet.

Thanks to the former Soviet system of education, practically every citizen in Tajikistan is literate. This means that people who are interested in the Christian message can read materials in their own language. The restrictions imposed by the government (all materials must be approved and only registered groups may be active) mean that most distribution etc. must be done unofficially. A Tajik Bible translation has been available since the 1990s.

- **Unemployment:** Due to the country's high level of unemployment, Russia has always been a key destination for hundreds of thousands of Tajiks seeking seasonal jobs at Russian construction sites, farms and factories. Unemployment surged when Russia announced in March 2020 that it would close its borders to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, Tajikistan itself had not yet registered its first COVID-19 death (Source: [RFE/RL, 18 March 2020](#)). In [April 2024 RFE/RL](#) stated that "Russia is home to an estimated 1 million Tajik migrant workers and others who are dual citizens. Working in Russia provides a lifeline for them as there are not many jobs or other opportunities in impoverished Tajikistan."
- **Corruption:** In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2023 ([CPI 2023 Tajikistan](#)), Tajikistan ranks among the twenty most corrupt countries: #162 out of 180 countries. Corruption in Tajikistan is 'systemic in nature'. The majority of Tajiks believe that bribes, embezzlement of state funds, the government's inability to eliminate the phenomenon, nepotism and other similar problems are normal practice (Source: [Asia News, 28 January 2022](#)).

- **Poverty:** In February 2022, the government of Tajikistan decided not to increase pensions for any category, except for orphaned or abandoned children. The Central Asian country continues to be one of the poorest in the world, according to World Bank figures: a third of the population (just under 10 million) lives below the poverty line. The situation worsened due to the exponential growth of inflation (Source: [Asia News, 10 February 2022](#)). However, the [World Bank's Tajikistan Country Overview/Economy](#) (accessed 23 August 2024) states: "Poverty, at the \$3.65 line (in 2017 Purchasing Power Parities (PPP)), is projected to decline from 10.7% in 2023 to 9.2% in 2024."

Aftermath of the Moscow concert hall attack

After 11 Islamic State-Khorasan extremists attacked a concert hall near Moscow in March 2024, killing about 150 people, migrant workers from Tajikistan (but also other Central Asian countries) experienced severe difficulties from the Russian authorities. Russian officials blocked them from entering the country and deported a significant number (Source: [RFE/RL, 4 April 2024](#)). Thousands of Tajik migrant workers were stranded at Moscow Vnukovo airport (Source: [RFE/RL, 29 April 2024](#)). As a result, many families in Tajikistan lost their main source of income.

In general, Christians experience the same problems as all other people in the country and are not especially targeted economically or socially. The only exception to this is the pressure from the social environment (family, local imams, villagers) on Christians with a Muslim background.

Gender perspective

Tajikistan has deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and it is estimated that 90% of women have no say in domestic decisions. Human Rights Watch has highlighted domestic violence as an ongoing serious problem, noting that protection and support for victims fall short ([HRW 2024 Tajikistan country chapter](#)). Many victims are fearful of accessing justice due to a lack of trust in the police, stigma surrounding domestic violence, and insufficient laws criminalizing domestic violence. Reports of domestic violence – primarily affecting women and girls – rose significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2010, the Tajikistan raised the minimum age for marriage from 17 to 18. Authorities said the move was to protect women's rights and ensure their well-being. Tajiks, however, can still marry at 17 with a court's permission. Official statistics show that underage marriages with court permission have rising steadily in Tajikistan in recent years. More than 4,000 people married at the age of 17 with a court's approval in Tajikistan in 2022, according to Tajik human rights ombudsman Suhaili Qodiri. The number marks a significant rise from 2018 when registry offices recorded some 2,500 underage marriages. The majority of those who married at 17 years are women, as most families in the conservative society prefer to have their daughters marry early (Source: [RFE/RL, 23 January 2024](#)).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: Tajikistan](#) (23 February 2024) / survey date - January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 41.6% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 15.6% of the total population. As of January 2024, 76.1% of social media users in Tajikistan were male and only 23.9% female.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 102.9% of the total population. According to a [June 2020 study by the Asian Development Bank](#), significant gender gaps remain in access to mobile phones and the Internet. This makes accessing information and participating in digital community harder for women.

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: April 2024):

- “The nation of Tajikistan has had to struggle through a further two years of economic hardship following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. This has included receiving millions of dollars in foreign aid and loans just to maintain liquidity in a country that is already one of the most impoverished in the region. The strain on financial resources inevitably means a continuation of the absence of any meaningful investment or development programs for telecommunications infrastructure, beyond the occasional symbolic and superficial pronouncements from the government for the sector to ‘do better’.”
- “The fixed-line telephony and fixed broadband markets continue to languish far behind the mobile sector in terms of teledensity and penetration. With only around 6,000 fixed broadband customers (0.07% penetration), there would appear to be massive growth potential but the limited fixed-line infrastructure in the country suggests there’s little likelihood of that occurring any time soon.”
- “The size of Tajikistan’s mobile market dwarfs the fixed-line segment, with an estimated penetration rate of nearly 120%. With a number of private sector companies active in the mobile market, so too has there been more commitment to investment in network upgrades and expansion. Three MNOs – MegaFon, Tcell, and ZET Mobile – have all launched commercial 5G services, initially in areas of the capital city Dushanbe. The move towards higher-speed mobile services should further underpin the growth in the nascent mobile broadband market, which is still estimated to be at a relatively low penetration level of 42% (at least relative to most other Asian nations) but is predicted to enjoy a strong compound annual growth rate of more than 8% for at least the next five years.”

According to the annual report of media watchdog "Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)" released on January 4, the media landscape in Tajikistan is in its "worst state" since the Central Asian nation's civil war in the 1990s; the country's authoritarian president, Emomali Rahmon, has established himself as an "absolute power with no tolerance for dissent". Seven journalists in Tajikistan were sentenced to lengthy prison terms on dubious charges in 2022 and 2023 as the government's crackdown on the media intensified (Source: [RFE/RL, 5 January 2024](#)).

Despite Tajikistan not being included in Freedom House’s [Freedom on the Net report 2023](#), it is known that Internet access is strictly monitored and censored by the regime. However, foreign Christian websites (e.g. in Russia) are mostly accessible. Satellite dishes provide a good alternative to access

international information, but they are expensive and few Tajiks can afford them. Nonetheless, there are many options for Christians to present the Christian faith via (foreign) websites, via SD cards in smartphones, and through radio and television programs via satellite technology. These modern possibilities are popular, since Christian publications in book format (also magazines and DVDs) are far more easily confiscated by police during raids and searches.

Security situation

Tajikistan shares a long border with Afghanistan of well over 1,000km. This brings two main worries: a) possible infiltration by the Taliban or Islamic State group (IS); and b) cross-border transportation of opium from the production fields in Afghanistan to the 'markets' in Russia and Europe. To counter the first threat, the Tajik government has made a deal with Russia, allowing Russian soldiers to be stationed along the border with Afghanistan. So far, this has succeeded, since no infiltration by Islamic militants has been reported. However, the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is porous enough to allow drug trafficking. Due to corrupt officials, organized crime cartels manage to transport huge amounts of opium across Tajikistan to destinations in Europe.

IS activity has been the cause of some killings, as listed by [UK Government travel advice/safety and security](#) (accessed on 30 April 2024):

- “In 2019, it was reported that 17 people were killed in an armed attack on a Tajik security checkpoint on the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) claimed responsibility.”
- “There are infrequent incursions by armed criminal and terrorist groups across the Afghanistan Border into Tajikistan, mainly at night. In August 2023, 3 terrorists were reportedly killed by Tajik border forces.”

The March 2024 attack by ISKP on a Moscow concert hall has only worsened the situation.

The Taliban took over power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Prior to that, approximately 600 Afghan servicemen crossed the border into Tajikistan while retreating from Taliban fighters; they were repatriated on 6 July 2021 (Source: [RFE/RL, 7 July 2021](#)). Confronted with the new Taliban government in Afghanistan, adjacent Tajikistan has broken ranks from its Central Asian neighbors (who largely adopted a conciliatory posture) and opted for a more confrontational approach (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 10 September 2021](#)). In October 2021, Tajikistan moved additional armed forces up to the Afghan border and the president visited a border area to watch a military parade. The Taliban responded by bringing up extra forces to the border with Tajikistan, including Tajik citizens belonging to radical Islamic groups in Afghanistan and whom the Taliban recently armed with captured US weapons and equipment (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 October 2021](#)). Since then, there has been no improvement in the situation.

In October 2021, China began building military bases and observation points on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In an unspecified location, not far from the Wakhan Corridor in Badakhshan province, the Chinese are showing ambitions to control the region, also by training Tajik forces (Source: [Asia News, 20 October 2021](#)).

According to the [The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst, 27 March 2023](#):

- "In July 2022, social media and Telegram channels were abuzz with discussions about the formation of a new militant group in northern Afghanistan, the Tehrik-e-Taliban Tajikistan (TTT). Also known as the Tajik Taliban, the group is reportedly led by Muhammad Sharipov aka Mahdi Arsalan, a citizen of Tajikistan. ... Meanwhile, the TTT profile and presence in northern Afghanistan has been rising quietly. The TTT is well-armed and dangerous. It is a non-state actor which operates with the full support and protection of the Taliban regime. As it steps up operations against its enemies and pursues them into their safe havens in Tajikistan and elsewhere, the situation along the Afghan-Tajik border could ignite tensions. Tajikistan's already fraught relationship with the Taliban regime could worsen in the coming months."

The eastern region named Gorno-Badakhshan is another security issue for Tajikistan. Problems in the remote area have a long history. Tensions between the government and residents of the restive region have simmered ever since a five-year civil war broke out shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Gorno-Badakhshan, a linguistically and ethnically distinct region, was home to rebels who opposed government forces during the conflict (Source: [RFE/RL, 19 May 2022](#)). The region makes up 45% of Tajikistan but only 3% of its population but has seen many violent protests and skirmishes, including in July 2012, when 40 people were killed in the unrest that was sparked by the fatal stabbing of the regional head of the State Committee on National Security. Other sources say the number of dead was more than 200 (Source: [RFE/RL, 18 May 2022](#)). The most recent outbreak of violence was in May 2022. On 17 May 2022 Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs said one person was killed in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) when security forces fired rubber bullets and tear gas against protesters who were calling for the resignation of political leaders in the region (Source: [RFE/RL, 17 May 2022](#)). A few days later the number of dead rose to more than 20 (Source: [Asia News, 21 May 2022](#)). The regime of President Rahmon decided to prosecute the Badakhshan activists and in November 2022 five of these activists were handed life sentences (Source: [RFE/RL, 25 November 2022](#)).

Another source of major conflict over the past years has been the poorly demarcated border with Kyrgyzstan. The following incidents occurred in 2022/23:

- **27 January 2022:** Border clashes left at least two people dead and many more wounded in a standoff over a blocked road (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 January 2022](#)).
- **10 March 2022:** Officials from Kyrgyzstan's Batken district and Tajikistan's Sughd region held talks after border guards from the two sides exchanged fire earlier in the day (Source: [RFE/RL, 10 March 2022](#)).
- **12 April 2022:** A Tajik border guard died of wounds he sustained in a shoot-out. Two Kyrgyz border guards and four Kyrgyz civilians were also wounded in the incident (Source: [RFE/RL, 14 April 2022](#)).
- **June 2022:** Several clashes and shootings occurred in June 2022 between Tajik and Kyrgyz border guards in the Kekh locality, 15 km from the Tajik town of Isfar. (Source: [RFE/RL, 20 June 2022](#))
- **November 2022:** What had been a long-running local conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan regarding the delimitation of borders and the fate of exclaves expanded in October 2022 to include major military units and the targeting of infrastructure deep within the territory of both countries (Source: [Jamestown Foundation, 3 November 2022](#)).

- **February 2023:** Both countries managed to avoid a war by holding regular meetings (Source: [RFE/RL, 28 February 2023](#)).
- **2023 and 2024:** Several agreements were made between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to settle border demarcation issues. For more details, see above: *Recent History*.

Christian origins

Nestorian missionaries first brought Christianity to the Tajiks during the 6th century and Islam arrived about a century later (according to Islamic tradition). The Nestorian Christians (also known as the Church of the East) lived side-by-side with the Muslims until Timur Lenk (a.k.a. Tamar Lane) eradicated Christianity from his empire in the 14th century.

Christianity returned to Tajikistan at the end of the 19th century when the Russian Empire conquered the mountainous region. Between 1864 and 1885 Russia gradually took control of the entire territory of Russian Turkestan, the Tajikistan portion of which had been controlled by the Emirate of Bukhara and Khanate of Kokand. It should be noted that only the Russian rulers were Christians - there were no known Tajik Christians at the time.

Under Joseph Stalin many Russians, Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Poles that were deemed unreliable were sent to Tajikistan in the 1930s. This meant a huge growth in the number of Christians in Tajikistan. After the death of Stalin in 1953, many of them returned home and left Tajikistan. Christians currently form just 0.6% of the Tajik population.

Church spectrum today

Tajikistan: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	47,900	76.5
Catholic	190	0.3
Protestant	8,400	13.4
Independent	5,700	9.1
Unaffiliated	430	0.7
Doubly-affiliated Christians	0	0.0
Total	62,620	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	2,100	3.4
Pentecostal-Charismatic	5,200	8.3

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not

*Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".*

Most Christians belong to ethnic minorities - Russian and Ukrainian. The number of Christians decreased sharply in the 1990's due to the wave of Russian and Ukrainian emigration from Tajikistan in the early independence period.

Despite the emigration, according to the World Christian Database (accessed May 2024), the largest official church denominations in Tajikistan are:

- Russian Orthodox Church
- Ukrainian Orthodox Church

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=Tajikistan>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.

External Links

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