

Tajikistan Overview

The *Republic of Tajikistan* is a landlocked and mountainous country located in Central Asia. It shares political boundaries with four other countries; Kyrgyzstan to the north, China to the east, Afghanistan to the south, and Uzbekistan to the west. Tajikistan remains the poorest and most economically fragile of the former Soviet Republics. More than half of its population lives on less than US\$2 a day.

Tajikistan's Flag

The Tajikistan flag is made up of three stripes of which the middle white stripe is the largest. The white is used to symbolize purity and cotton as well as the snowy mountain peaks of Tajikistan. The red color is to represent the sun, the strength and unity of the nation along with victory. Green is the color of Islam and a representation of the gift of nature. The central crown surrounded by seven stars has two meanings. The crown is used to represent the people of Tajikistan, the seven stars is to show happiness and perfection.¹



Courtesy of CIA World Factbook

Physical Geography

Tajikistan constitutes an area of 143,100 sq km, over 90 percent of which is mountainous.² The Trans-Alay Mountains lie in the northern portion of the country and are joined with the rugged Pamir Mountains by the Alay Valley. Tajikistan's highest point at 7,495 meters Qullai Ismoili Somoni, was previously known as "Communism Peak", and was the tallest mountain in the former USSR. While the lowest elevation in the country is roughly 300 meters, fifty percent of the country is at an elevation of over 3,000 meters.³ Large valleys allowing for expansive agriculture periodically punctuate the mountains. These include the western Fergana Valley in the north, the Kofarnihon Valley, and the Vakhsh Valley (both in the southwest). There are over 8,000 glaciers in Tajikistan, predominately located in the Pamir Mountains.⁴ The largest is the Fedchenko Glacier, which is roughly 70 km long and occupies an area of roughly 700 sq km. It is the longest glacier outside of the Polar Regions.⁵ These glaciers appear to be disappearing at an alarming rate due to global warming (see below). Glacial lakes that dot the terrain and glacial runoff help feed large rivers, which flow west from the mountains. These rivers drain into the Aral Sea basin and are a source of valuable water not only for Tajikistan, but the many surrounding countries. These large river systems include the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and Zeravshan Rivers. Tajikistan alone, contributes roughly fifty percent of the water volume to the Aral Sea.⁶

¹ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

² "Tajikistan: Country Overview". *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 26 July 2010.

³ World Bank/UNISDR. "Central Asia and Caucasus Disaster Risk Management Initiative, Risk Assessment for Central Asia and Caucasus, Desk study review". 2009. 45. Web. 26 July 2010.

⁴ Chemonics International Inc., "Biodiversity Assessment for Tajikistan". 2001. USAID. 3. Web. 24 July 2010.

⁵ Oxfam International. "Reaching Tipping Point? Climate Change and Poverty in Tajikistan". 2009. 7. Web 22 July 2010.

⁶ Chemonics International Inc., "Biodiversity Assessment for Tajikistan". 2001. USAID. 3. Web. 24 July 2010.

Fluctuating climate and water resource management policies continue to be a point of tension in the region.

Tajikistan has a semiarid continental climate with temperatures and rainfall varying depending on altitude. Most areas experience hot summers and cold winters, with colder temperatures in higher elevations. Tajikistan's southwestern lowlands experience the warmest temperatures and highest rainfalls.⁷ The region is rich in biodiversity with deserts, semi-deserts, forests, wetlands, steppes, deciduous shrub-lands, and meadows constituting the major eco-regions.

Tajikistan is in a very seismically active region due to its proximity to tectonic plate boundaries. There is a high risk of earthquakes that can have devastating effects on the people and infrastructure of the country. An example of this occurred in July of 2006, when an earthquake in the Koumsangir region caused \$22 million in damage and affected 15,427 people. The topography of the country lends itself to be susceptible to mudslides caused by earthquakes, rainfall, and glacial melt. Tajikistan is especially prone to flooding during the spring rains and summer glacial melting. There is continuing need for disaster mitigation and response program building in the country, including the implementation of seismically stable building techniques such as the Mulberry branch technology used in some of Habitat for Humanity houses.

People

- Tajikistan has a population of just over seven million people.
- Urbanization is taking place at a slow rate and much of the population, almost seventy-five percent, lives in a rural setting.⁸ Due to the steep mountainous terrain, the majority of the population can be found inhabiting the larger valleys. Throughout the mountains, villagers utilize the smaller valleys and canyons for subsistence agriculture. Since agricultural land can be at a premium, many times villagers will construct their houses on the sides of mountains, and grow their crops on the valley bottom below them (which typically would have better access to water resources).
- The capital and largest city of Tajikistan is Dushanbe, with a population of roughly 650,000 people. It is located in the western portion of the country at the southern foothills of the Alay Mountains.
- To the far north of Dushanbe, in the Fergana Valley, lies the second largest urban settlement in Tajikistan, Khujand. It is the oldest town in Tajikistan, having been founded by Alexander the Great over 2,300 years ago. Khujand's beneficial geographic location has also helped make it one of the wealthiest towns in Tajikistan.
- Ethnic Tajiks constitute almost three quarters of the population while Uzbeks constitute the next largest ethnic group, at around fifteen percent of the total population.
- Russian and Kyrgyz ethnic groups also make up noticeable populations in Tajikistan.⁹
- The official language of Tajikistan is Tajik, which is closely related to another Indo-European language, Persian. Very unique from other Persian dialects, Tajik utilizes a modified version of the Cyrillic alphabet.
- Russian is typically spoken throughout the region, especially as an intermediary and business language. Russian is becoming less widely spoken with the youth, who are studying either English or Arabic in school.¹⁰

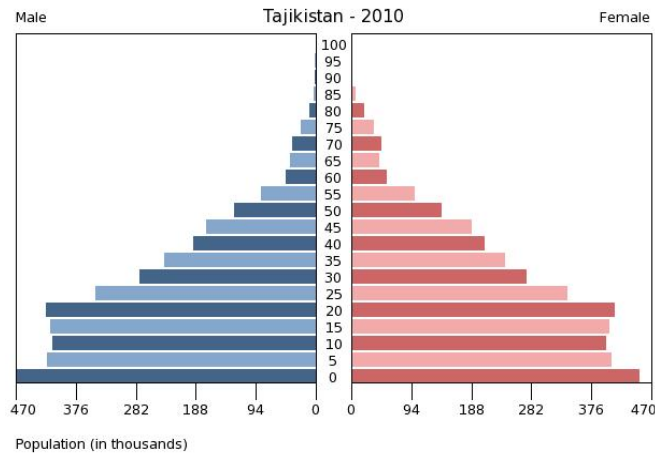
⁷ "Tajikistan: Country Overview". *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 26 July 2010.

⁸ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

⁹ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

¹⁰ "Tajikistan: Country Overview". *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 26 July 2010.

- Islam is the predominant religion within Tajikistan, having been brought to the people of Tajikistan by the Arabs in the seventh century. Around eighty-five percent of the population is Sunni Muslim.¹¹



Courtesy of U.S. Census Bureau

Analyzing Tajikistan's population pyramid, one can see that it is reflective of a developing country with characteristic population growth. Sixty-seven percent of population is under the age of 29.¹² In Tajikistan, the life expectancy at birth is 66 years. The population growth rate is around 1.85 percent. The birth rate is 26.5 births per 1,000 population and the death rate is 6.7 deaths per 1,000 population. The fertility rate is just below three children born per woman. Rapid population growth has been somewhat curbed by high emigration and a relatively high infant mortality rate, almost 40 deaths per 1,000 live births. Tajikistan enjoys a very high literacy rate (defined as the population aged fifteen and over who can read and write) at 99.5 percent.¹³

¹¹ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

¹² World Bank. "Tajikistan Country Brief". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

¹³ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

History

500 BC

Today's Tajiks were first referenced in 500BC as the descendants of Iranian peoples in the country of Bacteria. Bacteria became part of the Persian Macedonian empires under Alexander the Great.

Between the **7th Century AD** and the **15th Century**, the Tajiks came under the influence of the first Iranian Samanid dynasty.

10th Century AD

Tajiks were a sedentary people who became known as skilled cattle raisers, fruit growers and traders.

16th Century

The Tajik land formally become part of the Mongol-Turkic Empire known as the khanate of Bukhara.

19th Century

In the late 19th century the khanate of Bukhara came under Russian control.

20th Century

In 1924 Tajikistan's political boundaries were formed out of what was formally part of Uzbekistan.

In 1929 Tajikistan became a part of the Soviet Union. Agriculture productivity expanded with large scale irrigation projects and collectivization.¹ Unfortunately, much of this expansion caused environmental degradation and health problems for the local population (a common theme for much of the former Soviet Union).

1991

Tajikistan gained independence but plunged almost immediately into political turmoil and civil war that lasted until **1997**.

Economy

In the years of tenuous peace since the end of the civil war, Tajikistan's economy has had difficulties recovering and the country has struggled to lift itself out of extreme poverty. The majority of Tajikistan's population struggles on subsistence agriculture and remittances from family members. Agricultural land is at a premium as only around seven percent of the terrain is arable.¹⁴ Due to a lack of employment within the country, nearly half of the labor force works abroad, primarily in Russia and Kazakhstan, supporting families back home through remittances. The exact number of labor migrants is unknown, but estimated at one million. Many people also depend on humanitarian aid for survival.

Cotton and aluminum are the major export commodities of Tajikistan. Various outdated Soviet systems remain in place and a failure to innovate these sectors has reduced their potential viability. Lack of government accountability and transparency has impeded the ability of both the aluminum and cotton sectors to improve effectiveness. The recent global economic financial crisis has slowly started affecting Tajikistan. The price of export commodities has slumped and Tajik workers abroad are having a hard time finding work in Russia.¹⁵

¹⁴ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

¹⁵ World Bank. "Tajikistan Country Brief". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

Tajikistan has enormous hydropower potential. It is estimated that the country is currently only utilizing six percent of its potential hydropower resources.¹⁶ At the same time, hydroelectricity is used to power over ninety percent of the country's energy needs.¹⁷ Hydroelectric power is often sold to neighboring countries, which have much less hydropower resources.

Politics

Tajikistan is a republic with functioning Executive, Legislative, and Judicial branches. The current president, Emomali Rahmon has been in office since 1994. Other members of Executive branch include the Prime Minister and a Council of Ministers. The Legislative branch consists of a Supreme Assembly (of which the majority is selected by local deputies) and the Assembly of Representatives (selected by popular vote). The Judicial branch consists of a Supreme Court.¹⁸ There appears to be substantial corruption both in regards to the government and businesses. According to Transparency International in 2009, Tajikistan ranks 158th of 180 countries measured in the Corruption Perceptions Index. The widely recognized survey uses a combination of expert assessments and opinions surveys to audit the level of corruption. Corruption, geographic location, and the War in Afghanistan have led to Tajikistan becoming a major transport point for heroin. It is currently ranked third in the world for opiate seizures and this has also led to issues regarding drug use within the country..¹⁹ One will see an increase in social, economical, and health problems associated with heroin use. This includes a climbing HIV/AIDS rate.

¹⁶ GlobalSecurity.org. "Tajikistan: Energy". Web. 26 July 2010.

¹⁷ "Tajikistan: Country Overview". *World Geography: Understanding a Changing World*. ABC-CLIO, 2010. Web. 26 July 2010.

¹⁸ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

¹⁹ CIA. "World Factbook". 2010. Web. 20 July 2010.

Definitions and key terms:

- **Seismically:** Something that is caused by or subject to earthquakes or earthshaking.
- **Tectonic Plate boundaries:** The Earth's outer shell or lithosphere is constructed out of rigid plates. The plates join together like the pieces of a jigsaw to form the surface of the Earth. These plates, called tectonic plates, have boundaries where one plate ends and the other plate begins. The tectonic plate boundaries are often areas where you will find earthquakes, mountains and volcanoes. This is a result of different types of plates colliding or sliding above or below one another.
- **Global warming:** The increase in the average or global temperature of the atmosphere of the earth. It is the result of carbon dioxide trapping the heat of the sun near the earth's surface rather than allowing it to be reflected back away from the earth. It is debated whether it is a result of human activity or a naturally occurring process.
- **Glacial runoff:** Water which comes from glaciers. The amount of glacial runoff, or water from glaciers is increasing as a result of global warming because the ice which glaciers are formed from melts faster as the atmosphere of the earth becomes warmer.
- **Biodiversity:** The diversity (number and variety) of species of plant and animal life in a given habitat, or the Earth as a whole.
- **Steppes:** A large area of cold, dry grassy land which usually does not have trees. Similar to (African) savannah or (US) prairie.
- **Deciduous shrub-lands:** Land with plants distinguished from trees by having multiple stems and being quite small in height. They are deciduous because they drop their leaves annually when the weather becomes dry or cold. Therefore, they have very few or no leaves for part of the year. The dropping of leaves is often preceded by the leaves changing color, for example becoming orange or red.
- **Infrastructure:** The basic physical and organizational structures needed for a country, society or business to work. A country's infrastructure includes roads and airports.
- **Topography:** The study and/or description of the Earth's surface shape and its natural and manmade features, such as lakes or mountains. Words that might be used in connection with topography are 'steep' or 'level' e.g. for describing land.
- **Mitigation:** Human intervention with the aim of lessening or reducing the effects, or potential consequences of a particular event. The event could be a natural disaster, like a flood and the mitigation could be putting down sandbags to soak up water.
- **Mulberry branch technology:** The use of Mulberry branches in homes built by Habitat for Humanity to make them seismically stable, stable during earth tremors or quakes.
- **Urbanization:** The movement of people from rural areas to cities, or the industrial development of an area.
- **Subsistence agriculture:** The farmer grows crops to sustain his family, there will be little produce left to sell or trade with.
- **Population growth rate:** The increase of a population in a specified amount of time.
- **Birth rate:** The number of live births per 1000 of the population in a specified area and time.
- **Death rate:** The number of deaths per 1000 of the population in a specified area and time.
- **Fertility rate:** The number of children a woman is estimated to have (between the ages of 15-44) in a region or country.
- **Infant mortality rate:** The number of infant deaths (1 year or younger) per 1000 live births in a specified area and time.
- **Remittances:** An allowance or a transfer of funds from one place to another. This could include families working in another country and sending some of the money they have earned back to their families.
- **Arable:** The farming of crops.
- **Hydropower:** Energy that comes from the force of moving water and is then used to generate electricity. Common types of hydropower use dams on big rivers to collect, store and then release water through a turbine, generating power. Small canals can also be used.

Additional resources for further study:

Information about Tajikistan – politics, culture and history

Habitat for Humanity-Tajikistan: www.habitat.tj

www.tajik-gateway.org

www.tajikart.com

www.eurasianet.org/resource/tajikistan/index.shtml

www.untj.org/?c=13&id=13

www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5775.htm

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1296639.stm

www.undp.tj/

Bio-sand filters

<http://www.biosandfilter.org/biosandfilter/index.php/item/229>

http://www.habitat.org/eurasia/learn_about_habitat/our_impact/water_project_tajikistan_wins_award.aspx

Access to clean water

childrensafedrinkingwater.com/csdw/pur_packet.shtml

www.vestergaard-frandsen.com/lifestraw

www.ryanswell.ca

Children and access to clean water:

A life like mine: How children live around the world, written by DK and UNICEF. This book explains to children about the importance of human rights including access to a safe home and clean drinking water. It introduces these topics using charts and maps coupled with quotes and stories from children all over the world.

One Well: The story of water on earth, Rochelle Strauss. This book is recommended for students aged 9-12, it explains that the water is a resource that is shared by everybody on earth. It helps children to understand that water is not an infinite resource, it explains where water comes from and explains how we as a global community must protect it.