



# TURKMENISTAN

## Quick Facts

Population: 5,528,627 (July 2020 est.)

Area: 488,100 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Turkmen 85%, Uzbek 5%, Russian 4%, other 6% (2003)

Religions: Muslim 89%, Eastern Orthodox 9%, unknown 2%

Government Type: presidential republic; authoritarian

GDP (official exchange rate): \$37.93 billion (2017 est.)

*Map and Quick Facts derived in part from the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated August 2020)*

## INTRODUCTION

*Islam in Turkmenistan is comprised of an unusual blend of Sufi mysticism, orthodox (Sunni) Islam, and shamanistic Zoroastrian practices. The cult of ancestors is still observed, and reverence for members of the ovlats, or four holy tribes, is still strong. Popular or “folk” Islam is centered around Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam that originated in Central Asia. The veneration of holy places (generally tombs connected with Sufi saints), mythical personages, and tribal ancestors continue to play an active role in the preservation of religious feeling among the population.*

*Folk Islam, together with the Soviet-era repression of religion and the authoritarian nature of the country’s political system, act as barriers to the growth of Islamism in Turkmenistan. Thus, the country’s leadership has sought to capitalize on the popularity of Sufism in order to encourage religious beliefs to conform to local popular practices as a way of combating the emergence of Islamism. As in other parts of Central Asia, the distinction between religious and “national” rituals is blurred in Turkmenistan. Since the perestroika period of the late 1980s, the Turkmen leadership has attempted to co-opt Islam as a fundamental component of its overarching nation-building campaign.*

## ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In much of Central Asia, the broad process of re-Islamization that took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s was accompanied by political movements that espoused a greater adherence to religious tenets. In Turkmenistan, however, there has been no discernable movement to introduce elements of *sharia* or to establish Islamic parties. The vast majority of the population prefers to disassociate religion from politics altogether, and would be unlikely to lend support to any attempt to replace secular governance with

religious rule, especially if doing so involved a political struggle.

Perhaps more than any other factor, the desire to perpetuate religious beliefs and practices that are widely regarded as “national” traditions in Turkmenistan has disempowered Islamism as a force for social mobilization. Turkmen generally view Islam as a crucial part of national culture, encompassing local customs that separate them from outsiders. As such, Islam has a significant secular component that has made it relatively immune to politicization and Islamist ideologies. *Islam-i halq* (“folk” Islam) rather than *Islam-i kitab* (orthodox Islam) is dominant, and is primarily concerned with the celebration of life cycles, the observation of the principle of sacrifice, and the preservation of mystical beliefs. The practice of *ziyarat* (shrine pilgrimage) sits at the heart of Islam in Turkmenistan.

Some of the most widespread practices among Turkmen believers – such as warding off the “evil eye” through the use of plants and amulets or performing pilgrimages to the graves of local Sufi saints – are considered heretical by purist Muslims. As Central Asia expert Ahmed Rashid points out, fundamentalists have criticized Sufi followers to little avail for diverging from the Koran and tolerating non-Islamic influences.<sup>1</sup> At least in Turkmenistan, the inherent tension between folk Islam and an Islamist ideology that calls for greater orthodoxy has served to stymie any potential popular support for the latter.

Despite the apparent dearth of Islamist activity, the closed nature of polity and society in Turkmenistan has made it difficult to definitively ascertain the presence or absence of Islamist groups, and has given rise to speculation that Islamist activity may indeed exist within the former Soviet republic. For example, official reports on an unexpectedly fierce two-day battle in September 2008 provided little information, prompting Russian media and some Western wire services to make unconfirmed assertions that the violence was instigated by Islamist extremists.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, despite reports that the Islamist group Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HuT) has gathered support in Turkmenistan’s labor camps and prisons, when assessed in 2019 the group was found to have no significant support in the country.<sup>3</sup> No other Islamist group is known to have a presence in Turkmenistan, and no terrorist attacks tied to Islamist groups have been reported in the country since its independence.<sup>4</sup> In addition, there has been no noticeable penetration of the Islamic State terrorist group into the country to date – something that is at least partly due to Turkmenistan’s geographic and political isolation, as well as its indigenous form of Islam.<sup>5</sup> Nor is global *jihad* a significant draw for Turkmen Muslims; while the number of Turkmen traveling to join ISIS in Iraq and Syria between 2015-2017 was initially believed to number in the hundreds, more recent assessments have placed the figure at just several dozen (far fewer than from other countries in Central Asia or the Caucasus).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the majority of Turkmen fighters who did mobilize appear to have been recruited in foreign locales like Turkey or Russia; the recruitment process in Turkmenistan itself is complicated by the country’s geographic isolation, as well as by the government’s near-total control of society.<sup>7</sup> For its part, the government has attempted to increase the negative stigma attached to such activity via a massive propaganda campaign initiated in 2016, as well as through the monitoring of students or other migrants coming from abroad (especially Turkey).<sup>8</sup>

Radical but nonviolent groups operate in a limited capacity in Turkmenistan as well, although their exact number and locations are unclear.<sup>9</sup> Turkmen authorities call them “non-traditional Muslim groups,” and a number of raids have been carried out to arrest their members. The motivation of individuals to join such organizations is linked to the country’s internal problems, including systemic corruption, widespread unemployment, and generally bad socio-economic conditions. Islamist groups have capitalized on these trends, offering employment opportunities and advocating for anti-corruption measures.<sup>10</sup>

Turkmen authorities, for their part, have used the threat of radical Islam to suppress some Sufi or Sunni groups – including those simply observing traditional Islam in larger communities. The most well-known such case is that of Bahram Saparov, who organized a group of believers to study Islam and the Koran in Turkmenabad.<sup>11</sup> Despite nonconformist behavior, he and a significant number of group members were arrested and jailed; in fact, many (possibly including Saparov) died as a result of torture or starvation while incarcerated in Owadan Depe, Turkmenistan’s most notorious prison.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, where there are at least some individuals in Turkmenistan today interested in promoting political Islam, the country's "power organs" (its security services and state enforcement agencies) are strong enough to stifle any activity deemed suspicious. This activity has had the effect of allowing the Turkmen regime to further consolidate power, as well as resulting in the persecution of innocent individuals, often with deadly results. Moreover, given the opaque nature of security service action in the country, it is almost impossible to identify which incident constitutes a legitimate raid against a threat to the state, and which is merely a generalized action to suppress faith-based activities.

## ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Both Sufism and the forced cultural changes of the Soviet era help to explain the limited appeal of Islamist groups. Some analysts have argued that the legacy of Soviet rule represents a key factor hindering the Islamization in Central Asia, given that the region was isolated from the rest of the Muslim world—including its intellectual centers—for more than seventy years.<sup>13</sup> During decades of Soviet rule, Islam in particular was rejected as contrary to modernization, and all but a handful of mosques were either closed or turned into museums of atheism. Clergy was persecuted, religious literature was destroyed, and all Islamic courts of law, *waqf* holdings (Muslim religious endowments) and Muslim schools were dismantled. In the absence of functioning mosques during the Soviet period, local shrines acted as the centers of religious life, thereby ensuring they have remained an important part of worship in contemporary Turkmenistan.

However, while the aggressive campaign against religion launched by Soviet authorities undoubtedly placed greater distance between Central Asian Islam and the Islam practiced in the "mainstream" Muslim countries of the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia and Africa, the reality is that Islamic doctrine never firmly took root in Turkmenistan. Well before the Bolshevik Revolution, the Turkmen, like other nomadic peoples, preferred to pray in private rather than engage in the communal act of visiting a mosque.<sup>14</sup> A mobile lifestyle necessarily favored a non-scriptural, popular version of Islam, while naturally curtailing the presence and prevalence of professional clergy. As the scholar Adrienne Edgar has noted, any man at the time who could read and recite prayers was given the title of *mullah* (cleric).<sup>15</sup> Particularly in the nomadic regions, teachers of Sufi orders, or *ishans*, played a more influential role than the *ulema* (Muslim scholars). The independent Turkmen tribes likewise lacked Muslim *kadis* (judges). This meant that *sharia* only held sway in the sphere of family law, and was implemented by *mullahs* at birth, circumcision, marriage, and funeral ceremonies.<sup>16</sup>

In the twenty-first century, Turkmen continue to be governed less by Islamic law than by *adat* (tribal customary law), which has been passed down for many centuries. And because the majority of Turkmen do not practice their religion in a formal or institutional way, mosques in the country remain conspicuously empty.<sup>17</sup>

At the same time, authorities move early to suppress expressions of perceived Islamism within the population. Any manifestation of alleged Islamic traditions is equated with Islamism, and can garner action by the country's authorities (often without proper authorization and based on unwritten orders and "recommendations" from higher-ups). Conditions that have in the past prompted state action include men under the age of 40 growing beards, possession of religious texts, and regular visits to mosques.<sup>18</sup> Turkmen migrants and students coming from Turkey are given particular scrutiny, and often targeted for interrogation in anticipation of them engaging in activism to increase religiosity in the country. Those arrested and interviewed at the airport regarding their religious beliefs are usually banned from exiting from the country.<sup>19</sup> The reasons for these bans are often unclear, as border security may simply arbitrarily prevent people from leaving based assumption; further, some sources indicate that are the product of systemic corruption within government.<sup>20</sup> The Turkmen Migration Service has recently begun coordinating

its efforts to control human movement with other official agencies.<sup>21</sup>

## ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Strict state control of religion is a third, albeit less important, reason why Islamism has thus far failed to attract a significant following in Turkmenistan. Were Islamist groups to gather momentum, Turkmen security forces would most certainly repress any and all such activities.

Over the years, the Turkmen leadership has thoroughly co-opted the official religious establishment. Beginning in the late 1980s, Saparmurat Niyazov, first secretary of the Communist Party of the Turkmen SSR (1985-1991), and subsequently in his role of Turkmenistan's first president, a position which he occupied from 1991 until his death in 2006, sanctioned the revival of Muslim practices while simultaneously striving to keep religion within official structures. Thus, Niyazov endorsed the construction of mosques, the teaching of basic Islamic principles in state schools, the refurbishment of holy places, and the restoration of Islamic holidays. The resulting transformation was sweeping; whereas in 1987 there were only four functioning mosques in the Turkmen SSR, by 1992 that number had risen to 83, with another 64 mosques under construction.<sup>22</sup> By 2016, Turkmenistan had more than 400 registered mosques, although it is unclear how many Muslims make use of them.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, in 1991, Turkmenistan's first *madrassah* (Islamic seminary) was founded in Dashhowuz to help alleviate the country's acute shortage of trained religious clergy. Shrine pilgrimage was acknowledged by Niyazov as a fundamental component of Turkmen identity and even as an expression of patriotism. Seeking to improve their Islamic credentials, both Niyazov and his successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, made pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.

Nevertheless, the version of Islam promoted by the Turkmen government was heavily regulated. The state banned religious political parties and required religious communities to register with the government. In 1994, the government created the *Gengesh* (first called the Council for Religious Affairs, which was eventually replaced by the Committee for Work with Religious Organizations).<sup>24</sup> All senior Muslim clergy belong to the *Gengesh*, of which the chief *mufti*, who is appointed by the president, is also the deputy chair.<sup>25</sup> The *Gengesh* controls the hiring and firing of all clergy in Turkmenistan, thereby allowing the state to exert control on religious matters down to the village level.<sup>26</sup> In 1997, the government cracked down on Islamic activity and began closing anti-regime mosques by way of amendments to "The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations", which forced mosques and religious communities to obtain new licenses and registration subject to the discretion of the state.<sup>27</sup>

These restrictions have endured. Unregistered congregations are prohibited from gathering publicly and disseminating religious materials, with violators subject to penalties under the country's administrative code. The Dashowuz *madrassah* was closed in 2001, and in 2005 cutbacks were made at the Faculty of Muslim Theology at Magtymguly Turkmen State University, which was the only remaining official institution for training *imams*. Regular, state-led reshuffling of Muslim leaders keeps clergy in check; from 2003 to 2016, Turkmenistan went through five chief *muftis*, with other Muslim leaders being rotated at a similar rate.<sup>28</sup>

Even more so than the citizens of other Central Asian states, Turkmen are unable to travel and receive an education at *madrassahs* abroad. The government has aimed to restrict the population's contact with fellow believers abroad by limiting the number of Turkmen Muslims—including secret police and state officials—performing the *hajj* to Mecca each year to 650 pilgrims (less than a seventh of the quota allocated by Saudi authorities).<sup>29</sup> As of 2018, the number of Turkmen allowed to perform the *hajj* had decreased to 153 (down from 188 in 2016) – a decline that was due to official fears of potential radicalization.<sup>30</sup> The selection of those pilgrims who are allowed to go, meanwhile, remains under the tight control of state officials. All applications for official pilgrimage are thoroughly checked, including background screening

of the applicant's extended family, with even trivial reasons deemed cause for denial. It is likewise difficult to travel to *hajj* independently.<sup>31</sup> In the case of independent pilgrims, Turkmen authorities apply strict rules for travelers – with even stricter guidelines if one is travelling alone. to other countries even with more harshness. These obstacles include limits on the issuance of passports, denial of access to airplane boarding, or more generalized constraints on the grounds of “anti-Turkmen” behavior. Saudi *hajj* visas in passports are objects of particular interest at border crossings (except those of citizens officially selected by the government for *hajj*). Independent pilgrims travelling for *hajj* often have to reach Saudi Arabia by leaving Turkmenistan as traders or travelers to another country (Turkey is the most common transit point).<sup>32</sup> National minorities (mostly Uzbeks, but also Tatars or Tajiks) are especially restricted when it comes to travel, both for *hajj* as well as independent travel.<sup>33</sup>

After 2016, repression against unwanted Muslim groups increased as a result of the launch of a massive campaign against alleged supporters of the Fethullah Gülen movement. Many potential or even hypothetical Gülen followers were arrested and given long prison sentences. The campaign targeted teachers from former Turkish schools, state officials, and local businessmen.<sup>34</sup>

Turkmenistan's authorities have sought to limit unwanted Islamist trends by promoting a vision of Islam that is concerned with the preservation of tradition. In a fashion similar to that of neighboring Uzbekistan, the country's national leadership has attempted to capitalize on the popularity of Sufism in order to encourage religion to conform to local popular practices. So long as orthodox Islamic doctrine rejects and condemns some Sufi practices, such as the veneration of local saints and local shrine pilgrimages, as idolatrous, it is believed that Sufism will dampen any inclination among Turkmen believers to support potentially Islamist forms of ideology.<sup>35</sup>

Consequently, the leadership of Turkmenistan has taken steps to foster Sufi tradition and incorporate it into the regime's larger nation-building project. Thus, the Niyazov administration launched a modernization of the mosque and mausoleum complex of twelfth-century Sufi scholar Hoja Yusup Hamadani in the Mary region, one of the most important places of shrine pilgrimage in Turkmenistan. Likewise, rather than seeking to prohibit local pilgrimages to sacred places, both the Niyazov and Berdimuhammedov governments have encouraged them, even providing free accommodation for some pilgrims.<sup>36</sup> In 2009, citing fears of the swine flu, Turkmen authorities barred aspiring Muslim pilgrims from making the *hajj* to Saudi Arabia altogether, urging them instead to sojourn to 38 sacred sites across the country.<sup>37</sup> As of 2019, the government of Turkmenistan has shown no signs of easing pressure on Muslims, with censorship, educational, and legal restrictions remaining tightly in place.

Under Niyazov, the state-sponsored form of Islam in Turkmenistan underwent an unusual twist when the president made his extensive cult of personality a centerpiece of religious practice by styling himself as a prophet with his own sacred book, the *Ruhnama* (Book of the Soul). Niyazov regularly urged his country's citizens to study and memorize passages from the *Ruhnama*, making it required reading for university entry and for work in the public sector, which was the country's top employer. *Imams* were obliged to display the *Ruhnama* inside mosques and to quote from it in sermons or face possible removal or even arrest. In direct violation of *sharia*, Niyazov even ordered that passages from the *Ruhnama* be inscribed alongside passages from the Koran on the walls of the cathedral mosque in Gypjak; an inscription above the main arch reads “*Ruhnama* is a holy book, the Koran is Allah's book.”

In 2003, the country's long-serving senior Muslim cleric and deputy chairman of the *Gengesh*, Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah, was replaced for expressing dissent by repeatedly objecting to the *de facto* status of the *Ruhnama* as a sacred book on a par with the Koran. In 2004, he was sentenced to 22 years in prison on treason charges, but was granted amnesty in August of 2007.<sup>38</sup> Upon his release, Ibadullah thanked the president and accepted a post as an adviser at the president's State Council for Religious Affairs, thus remaining under close supervision.

Upon coming to power in 2007, Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov gradually phased out the cult of

Niyazov's quasi-spiritual guidebook for the nation.<sup>39</sup> Under the new president, the state's presence is still pervasive at all levels of religious institutions. *Imams* are still selected by the government via the Commission for Work with Religious Organizations (the successor organ to the *Gengesh*) and the security service.<sup>40</sup> While *imams* are no longer required to recite an oath of allegiance to the president during sermons, they are still required to pray for him.<sup>41</sup> The government likewise provides "recommendations" for sermon content – something which is a point of contention for some Turkmen Muslims, who resent government intrusion into their religious lives.<sup>42</sup>

It is difficult to speculate about the effects of government policy on religious beliefs, although much empirical research shows that repression of religious groups generally leads to increased radicalism.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, one would expect to see some mobilization of a religious opposition, and there is indeed some anecdotal evidence of this. Unconfirmed reports from Turkmen refugees have claimed that there are underground mosques in the country that preach anti-government sermons.<sup>44</sup> In the past, security officials from Turkmenistan have blamed this development on the harsh repression of Turkmenistan's religious groups and the ineptitude of the secret police.<sup>45</sup> Turkmenistan could also prove vulnerable to radical religious teaching due to theological ignorance among its citizens and clergy. The government has increasingly installed *imams* lacking in religious education; in fact, many viewed Nasrullah ibn Ibadullah as the last official with a proper religious education. Average citizens are rarely exposed to Islamic teaching, and while most households have a copy of the Koran, it is usually in Arabic, which few Turkmen citizens read. Turkmen-language Korans remain rare.<sup>46</sup>

As the United States and its allies continue to draw down their forces in Afghanistan, a process that has accelerated under the Trump administration, concerns remain that instability from Afghanistan could spread to Central Asia. These concerns are now compounded by the Turkmen fighting in Syria, and the potential for their return to the country. About a quarter million Turkmen live across the border in Afghanistan, providing a potential pool of recruits for extremist groups. However, there is as yet little evidence that the conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria threaten stability in Turkmenistan. To the contrary, most local authorities in Turkmenistan consider so-called radical groups a threat incompatible with the traditional Turkmen way of life and belief. So far, there is no evidence that former IS fighters of Turkmen origin have made their way back to their homeland. As Turkmen communities are relatively small and police presence is omnipresent, any newly returning person (even in urban areas) would arouse suspicion and be easy target for local authorities.

## ENDNOTES

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