

Central Asia

Principal protagonists



Governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyz/Uzbek communities.

Ethnic/tribal factions.

Islamist insurgents.

Nature of conflict

a) Ethnically-based land use conflicts, Fergana Valley. b) Islamist insurgency, Uzbekistan and generally. c) Politically-motivated intercommunal violence, Tajikistan; Kyrgyzstan.

👤 Human rights abuses by governments reported. (In May 2005, Uzbeki security forces shot up to 1,000 demonstrators.)

💀 60,000 (Tajikistan, 1992-7); 2,000 (Kyrgyzstan, 2010).

👤 1.2m (Tajikistan, 1992-7); 400,000 (Kyrgyzstan, 2010).

Population/ethnic composition

See table opposite.

Territorial extent

Kazakhstan: 2,724,900 km².

Kyrgyzstan: 200,000 km².

Turkmenistan: 488,000 km².

Tajikistan: 143,100 km².

Uzbekistan: 447,400 km².

Timeline

18th century: Central Asia absorbed into Russian Empire.

1924-36: Present day Central Asian republics created as Soviet Socialist Republics.

1991: Central Asian republics gain independence after collapse of USSR.

1992-7: Full-scale civil war in Tajikistan.

2005-6: Islamist demonstrations throughout region met with severe governmental repression.

May-June 2010: Anti-Uzbek violence in southern Kyrgyzstan.

Current status

Significant ongoing ethnic tensions.



The Central Asian region became part of the Tsarist Empire in, for the most part, the latter half of the 18th century, and for much of its history has been an area of relatively low levels of political awareness. Home to more than 100 ethnic groups, the region's borders were drawn fairly arbitrarily by the Soviet authorities. The Uzbek and Turkmen SSRs were created in 1924. Tajikistan, initially an autonomous region within Uzbekistan, achieved full SSR status in 1929; Kazakhstan and Kirghizia (as it was then known) only became SSRs in 1936. Unlike other parts of the USSR, such as the Baltics and the Caucasus, there was very little agitation for independence prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In common with the other SSRs, however, the 'five stans' became independent states in 1991.

Kazakhstan, the largest of the Central Asian republics (and the one with the largest Russian minority) has generally been the most stable, with significant moves towards a free market economy that have not, for the most part, been marked by political freedom; Kazakhstan politics remaining for the most part authoritarian and personality-driven. Turkmenistan, too, has generally remained peaceful despite – or because of – the authoritarian, and increasingly eccentric personality cult that surrounded Life President Saparmurat Niyazov Türkmenbaşy until his unexpected death, aged 66, in December 2006. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have all wrestled with the problems of Islamist activism and insurgency, with Uzbekistan generally taking the hardest line against *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and other underground Islamist groups.

Ethnic tensions between Russians and indigenous groups have been a feature of the post-independence environment, with some 2 million Russians emigrating from Uzbekistan to Russia.

A regional nexus of ethnic and religious conflict in the Central Asian region is the Fergana Valley, which straddles regions of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As in other regions of the former USSR, the republic borders were largely irrelevant while the whole region was geared to a single economic activity – cotton production – and it was united by a common political structure. With the collapse of the USSR, however, many communities found themselves on the 'wrong' side of an international border, while transport across the region acquired new difficulties. To compound the issue, Fergana is the

site of a number of exclaves: four Uzbeki, one Tajiki, and one Kyrgyz.

Land use and water resource pressures, clan rivalries and the threat of Islamist extremism in this religiously conservative area, all play a part in ethnic tensions. In 1989 and 1990 there were riots between Uzbek and Kyrgyz residents in the town of Uzgen, near Osh, and in May 2005 Uzbeki troops opened fire on Islamist demonstrators in the eastern Uzbeki town of Andijan, killing around 1,000.

Tajikistan was the first country in the region to experience significant post-independence violence. As the Soviet Union collapsed the generally conservative and hard-line Tajik regime began to adopt a more nationalist position, enacting laws in 1989 that gave the Tajik language primacy in the republic and establishing a foundation to preserve Tajik culture. These attempts to build a nationalist power-base were only partially successful, however, as splits developed between the urban political elites and the more culturally and religiously conservative rural regions. Weak civil institutions, religious, regional and tribal animosities, and factional conflicts within the ruling elite, all contributed to a rapid descent into full-scale civil war in Tajikistan. Fighting broke out in May 1992 between the Moscow-backed government, Islamists, and regional groups centred on the Garm and Gorno-Badakhstan districts. With the aid of Russian and Uzbeki troops, the Tajiki government initially gained the upper hand and in December 1992 a new government was formed under Emomali Rahmonov, who was heavily dependent on militia support from his home Kulyab region. These militias launched an at times ferocious attack on opposition factions, including militants from the Islamic Renaissance Party, the pro-Islamist Garmi people of Qurgonteppa, and the Pamiri, the latter hailing from the Gorno-Badakhstan region. Hundreds of thousands of Pamiri and Garmi were driven into Afghanistan in ethnic cleansing operations. There, elements became aligned with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, while others re-armed with the aid of Islamist militants from groups such as *Jamait-I-Islami*. Fighting in 1996 spread as far as the capital, but in 1997 a UN-brokered agreement led to a ceasefire, and peaceful elections were held in 1999.

Serious clashes in 2010 between Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities in southern Kyrgyzstan similarly had a political underpinning. In April 2010, following widespread political unrest, the President, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, was deposed and an interim government installed. Bakiyev's power base was among the Kyrgyz of Jalalabad and the southern regions of the country, to where he briefly fled before going into exile in Belarus. In May 2010, clashes erupted in Jalalabad when Kyrgyz protestors attacked an Uzbek university. Subsequent intercommunal violence, particularly in the city of Osh, extended into the third week of June and saw an estimated 2,000 fatalities as well as a major refugee exodus, mostly of Uzbeks into Uzbekistan. The interim government claimed Bakiyev supporters were responsible

for whipping up the violence against the Uzbek minority as a means of destabilizing the country. Kyrgyz activists allegedly were told that the Uzbeks were planning to use the instability of the country to secure the annexation of southern districts to Uzbekistan. There were also well substantiated claims (which the government nevertheless denied) of complicity by pro-Bakiyev elements within the security forces. The interim government later also claimed Islamist activists from *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan were involved, although most commentators dismissed this assertion. At the end of June 2010 voters endorsed a new constitution, and this, together with the announcement of a general election to held in October, consolidated somewhat the position of the interim government, but tensions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz remain high in the south of the country, as does Uzbeki mistrust of the state authorities.

Racial composition of the Central Asian republics (total population in brackets).

