



Turkmenistan in Brief

Turkmenistan is one of the most repressive and closed-off countries in the world. President Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, in power since 2006, exercises total control over all aspects of public life. In practice, the

judiciary is subordinate to the president, there are virtually no political opposition or independent media, and the government reacts to public dissent with harsh punishment. The Turkmen government is notorious for its lack of transparency and use of disinformation to obfuscate and inflate perceptions of the country’s political, economic, and human rights situation. Because of this secrecy and misdirection, it is often difficult to construct an accurate picture of developments or conditions in the country based on reliable data.

Key Data	
GDP (2020)	\$45.2 billion
FDI (2019)	\$2.2 billion
Population	6 million
Freedom House Freedom Score (2021)	2/100
TI Corruption Perceptions Index Score (2020)	19/100

Turkmenistan’s economy is largely reliant upon its fossil fuel industry, which makes up 35 percent of its \$45 billion gross domestic product, 90 percent of total exports, and 80 percent of fiscal revenues. Despite its mineral wealth, Turkmenistan has experienced a dire economic crisis since 2014 due to falling gas prices, poor harvests, and corruption.

The Human Rights Agenda

The most pressing human rights issues facing Turkmen citizens include enforced disappearances, transnational repression, and poor prison conditions.

Enforced Disappearances & *Incommunicado* Detention

Turkmenistan should end the practice of enforced disappearances and incommunicado detention, and provide the public and families of forcibly-disappeared persons and with information on their whereabouts.

Arbitrary arrests, *incommunicado* detentions, and enforced disappearances are hallmarks of government repression in Turkmenistan. International human rights organizations have documented 121 cases of enforced disappearances since 2002, resulting in at least 27 deaths in custody. Turkmenistan rarely releases any information about arrests and imprisonments to the public or families, making it difficult to establish the full scope of enforced disappearances. In one recent case, lawyer Pygambergeldy Allaberdyev was arrested in September 2020 and sentenced to six years in prison after a closed trial. Since that time, Allaberdyev’s whereabouts remain unknown and the government has not responded to his family’s attempts to secure additional information about his condition.

Transnational Repression

Turkmenistan should stop harassing, intimidating, and surveilling human rights activists, journalists, and students living abroad without authorization.

Ashgabat has used transnational repression to target Turkmen nationals living abroad. Leaked documents have revealed that Turkmen officials compile lists of Turkmen students living abroad and recruit a small number of them to spy on their peers. The purported objective of this monitoring is to identify and track the students’ political or religious extracurricular activities. Authorities often subject the families of dissidents living abroad to intimidation and harassment. For example, in spring 2021, Turkmen security officials repeatedly harassed family members of journalists Rozybai Jumamuradov and Devlet Bayhan, including by summoning Jumamuradov’s fourteen-year-old nephew and threatening to jail him, jail his family, and murder Jumamuradov.

Prison Conditions

Turkmenistan should establish a program to allow independent monitoring of places of detention without prior notice, including by independent organizations, and ensure that those held in prisons and other detention facilities are treated with dignity and are free from torture and ill-treatment.

Living conditions in Turkmen prisons are harsh, and are characterized by overcrowding and a lack of sanitation. Former prisoners have described prisons as inhumane, dangerous, and life threatening. Independent bodies are not permitted to monitor prisons in Turkmenistan, making it difficult to fully assess conditions. Numerous UN bodies have found that Turkmenistan's prison conditions do not meet international standards. According to personal accounts of the incarcerated, conditions include serious overcrowding, unsanitary conditions, inadequate access to drinking water, malnutrition, and exposure to extreme temperatures. Cost-cutting measures have led to food and medication shortages in detention facilities, leading to prisoners' reliance on food sent to them by their families. Prisoners' relatives report that prison authorities sometimes deny family members access to prisoners and prohibit family members from providing some with food, medicine, and other supplies. Torture is endemic in the pre-trial detention and prison systems. Officials reportedly assault prisoners with batons, plastic bottles filled with water, and dogs, which has reportedly led to loss of consciousness, damage to kidneys, and an inability to walk. Other forms of torture reported in prisons include the use of short "hunchback cells," the absence of heating and cooling, and refusal to address insect infestations.

Turkmenistan in the International Context

While Turkmenistan is extremely isolated, its mineral wealth and geographic location give it an important place in the regional economy. Turkmenistan was a major supplier of natural gas to Russia until 2009, when, following a gas pipeline explosion in which Russia was implicated, gas flows to Russia largely stopped. Indeed, Turkmenistan is much less dependent on Russia than in the past. Nonetheless, desperately poor and isolated, it still must maintain productive relations with Russia. Likely for this reason, Turkmenistan began more actively participating in Russia-led regional multilateral organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, and has taken steps to address concerns among the country's ethnic Russian minority. Yet major tensions remain, including over efforts by Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan to jointly develop Caspian gas fields and unlock trade across the Caspian, moves which could undercut Russia.

In 2014, following the completion of a pipeline to China, Turkmenistan's considerable gas exports began flowing almost exclusively to China, now making up 82% of the country's gas exports and 25% of China's gas imports. Turkmenistan's efforts to develop Caspian gas fields jointly with Azerbaijan also call for exporting gas west via Turkey, another country Turkmenistan has been courting recently. In one effort to bolster relations with Turkey, Turkmenistan has flirted with joining the Turkish-led group of Turkish speaking states, the Turkic Council. It now has observer status with the group.

The E.U. has recently upgraded engagement with Turkmenistan by opening a mission in the country in 2019. One of the E.U.'s main interests in the region is the possibility of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline, which would enable gas exports from Turkmenistan to Europe, likely via Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkmenistan's long arid border with Afghanistan has given it renewed prominence following the return to power of the Taliban. Since the Taliban's return, Turkmenistan has actively engaged the government, seeking productive relations with the group and to advance its long-term goals. Among them is the perpetually delayed TAPI gas pipeline, which, if constructed, would bring Turkmen gas to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan.