



Boundary representations are not necessarily authoritative.

## BACKGROUND

### Land and Climate

Afghanistan covers 251,827 square miles (652,230 square kilometers) of central Asia. A bit smaller than Texas, it is a landlocked country of rugged mountains. Its highest peak reaches 24,550 feet (7,483 meters). The most important mountain range is the Hindu Kush, which extends about 600 miles (966 kilometers) from the far northeast to the southwest, effectively bisecting the country. North of the Hindu Kush, the Turkestan Plains run down to the Amu Darya (River) on the northern border. After broadening into the Hazarajat central plateau, the mountains disappear into western deserts such as the Registan. For water, Afghanistan relies on four major river systems: the Amu Darya, the Kabul, the Helmand, and the Hari Rud. Northern Afghanistan is subject to major earthquake activity.

The climate varies according to elevation and location. Generally, the capital city of Kabul (6,000 feet, or 1,829 meters) has cold winters and temperate summers; Jalalabad (1,800 feet, or 549 meters) has a subtropical climate; and Kandahar (3,500 feet, or 1,067 meters) is mild year-round.

### History

Located along the Silk Road (a trade route extending from China to Europe), Afghanistan has been the Crossroads of Asia since ancient times and thus subject to invasion. Emperors and conquerors (Persians, Greeks, central Asians, and others) throughout history have attempted to control or pacify the region's inhabitants, always finding them fiercely

independent and formidable military opponents.

Islam was introduced in the seventh century and flourished in the Ghaznavid Empire (977–1186). Great destruction occurred in the 13th century with the Mongol invasions of Genghis Khan. His Turko-Mongol descendant, Tamerlane, established the Timurid Dynasty (1370–1506), famed for its arts and architecture. The Moghul Dynasty (1526–1707) rose to control eastern Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent, while the Persian Safavid Dynasty (1501–1732) held western Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's modern roots are in the Durrani Dynasty, founded in 1747 by Ahmed Shah Durrani. Members of his Pashtun subtribe basically ruled Afghanistan until 1978. However, during Durrani rule, Afghanistan became caught in the 19th century Great Game struggle for territory and influence between the Russian and British empires. Although internal unification was achieved under the Iron Amir, Abdur Rahman Khan (1880–1901), Britain maintained nominal control over foreign policy until Afghanistan's independence in 1919.

Cold War politics subjected Afghanistan to U.S. and Soviet competition. In 1978, five years after the monarchy was overthrown, Afghan communists staged a military coup in coordination with sympathetic elements in the army. Once in power, they instituted a number of reforms that were strongly opposed by many of Afghanistan's devoutly Muslim citizens. Soviet troops invaded Afghanistan in 1979 to prevent the communist government's collapse. The resulting Soviet-Afghan War caused widespread destruction, killed 1.5 million people, and drove more than 6 million refugees into Pakistan and Iran. When Soviet troops withdrew in 1989,

civil war continued between the communist government and Muslim *mujahideen* (holy warriors) from several political parties.

By 1992, different factions in Kabul began fighting each other for control of the country. One group, known as the *Taliban* (meaning “seekers of knowledge”), began punishing commanders from other groups for atrocities they had committed against civilians. These Taliban fighters received support from many war-weary Afghans. In 1996, the Taliban captured Kabul, and by 2000, the group controlled 90 percent of the country. Support for the Taliban slipped after it imposed strict laws based on its interpretation of *shari‘ah* (Islamic law). Opposing militias joined forces as the Northern Alliance to resist Taliban advances. A terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City in September 2001 caused the United States to join with the Northern Alliance in ousting the Taliban, who were sheltering al-Qaeda terrorists accused of masterminding the attack. U.S. forces and the Northern Alliance won control of Kabul and other key cities in November 2001.

Locally elected and tribal officials met in June 2002 to create a two-year transitional government. They chose Hamid Karzai as president. A constitution was approved in January 2004, and Karzai won presidential elections in October 2004. His administration is working to reconstruct a devastated infrastructure, bridge longstanding differences among the nation’s tribes, and combat a lucrative drug trade. Troops from the United States and other nations continue operations to establish security and fight Taliban and al-Qaeda militants. Although Karzai won a second term in 2009, the elections were fraught with allegations of fraud, which undermined confidence in the results. Karzai went on to issue a decree that gave him complete control over the Electoral Complaints Commission, which had helped to expose the fraud in the 2009 elections. He also blamed foreign observers for the election fraud and accused UN and EU officials of plotting against him.

## THE PEOPLE

### Population

Afghanistan has an estimated population of 29.12 million, growing by 2.5 percent annually. Millions of Afghan refugees live in Pakistan and Iran. Repatriation efforts have been hindered by drought, the presence of land mines, and a lack of infrastructure. Roughly 75 percent of all Afghans live in rural areas. Major cities include Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Jalalabad.

Afghanistan’s largest ethnic group is the Pashtun tribal society, which comprises 42 percent of the population and is divided into several major subtribes. Most Pashtuns live in the east and south. Most Tajiks (27 percent) live in the north, Uzbeks (9 percent) in the north-center, and Hazara (9 percent) in the center. Smaller numbers of Baluchi, Brahui, Kyrgyz, Nuristani, Qizilbash, and Turkmen together comprise 13 percent of the population.

### Language

Some 32 languages and dialects are spoken in Afghanistan. Dari (a form of Persian) is spoken most widely and has several dialects. Dari is the language of business and government. Pashto, spoken by Pashtuns, has two major variants and many dialects. Uzbeks and Turkmen speak Turkic languages. Smaller ethnic groups speak their own languages or a dialect of a major language. The Hazara, for example, speak a Dari dialect.

### Religion

Islam is the religion of virtually all Afghans. About 80 percent of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, while 19 percent (primarily Hazara and some Persian speakers) are Shi‘i Muslims. Small numbers of Sikhs and Hindus live in urban areas.

Founded by Muhammad of Arabia in 622, Islam is based on the belief in one God (*Allah*). Islam shares many biblical figures with Judaism and Christianity, but Muslims cite Muhammad as the last and greatest prophet. The *Qur‘an* is said to contain the will of *Allah* as revealed through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. The war against the Soviets was considered a holy war waged by the *mujahidin*, and through it Islam’s political power increased. Culturally, Islam guides most people’s lives from birth to death. Its influence on daily activities is often shared with such local behavior codes as *Pushunwali* (code of the Pashtuns).

### General Attitudes

Afghans typically are friendly and hospitable, but they can also be stern and hard depending on their war experiences. Although people identify themselves as Afghans, primary loyalty is usually to their family, kin group, clan, or tribe. Their various codes are often strict and inflexible, stressing honor and one’s responsibility to fulfill expected roles. Personal disputes are not solved easily because of the need to protect one’s honor. Family honor is also affected by personal behavior, so living the code properly is considered essential. Piety and stoicism are admired traits. Afghans value knowledge, wisdom, and education highly.

Traditionally, rural Afghans value wealth as defined by land ownership or a large family. Urban residents are more likely to view wealth in terms of money or possessions. Nomadic Afghans traditionally define wealth by the size of their herds.

People’s outlook on life is influenced by a great faith that *Allah* controls everything and that everything happens according to his will. This belief helps Afghans accept a very hard life, even if it somewhat dampens personal initiative to rise above difficult circumstances.

### Personal Appearance

Nearly all men in Afghanistan wear a *perahan tunban*. This consists of a knee-length shirt (*kamees*) worn over baggy trousers (*partoog*) that are pulled tight with a drawstring. Men may wear a dress coat or open vest (*vaskot*) over the *perahan tunban*. Shoes are removed for prayers, with the exception of special shoes (called *masy*) worn by some older Afghans. Pashtun and Nuristani men cover their heads with a flat wool

cap. The most common headwear is a *lungi* (turban) with a *kolah* (turban cap) in a color and design that can relate to the wearer's ethnic or regional background.

Women wear a long colorful dress with a short jacket, long coat, or shawl. They often wear a head-to-toe covering called a *chadiri* or *burqa* over their clothing; faces are covered by an intricately embroidered window through which the wearer can see. The *chadiri* was required public attire for all women during the Taliban era, and its use is still widespread. Jewelry made from gold and silver is common. Many people, especially children, wear a *tawiz* (amulet) to protect against evil.

## CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

### Greetings

A handshake is common among men, who tend to be expressive in greeting friends and may pat backs during an embrace. Lengthy verbal greetings are often accompanied by placing the right hand over the heart. A man does not shake hands with or otherwise touch a woman in public, although he may greet her verbally. Women friends embrace and kiss on alternating cheeks. Women might also shake hands.

Greetings vary by region and ethnic group, but Arabic greetings are accepted universally. *Al-salām 'alaykum* (Peace be upon you) is replied to with *Wa 'alaykum al-salām* (And peace also upon you). A common Dari greeting is *Khubus ti?* (How are you?), and the Pashto equivalent is *Sanga ye?* "Good-bye" is *Khoda hafiz* in Arabic, and *Khoday paman* in Pashto.

In formal situations, using an academic or professional title is essential. *Haji* (pilgrim) is reserved for those who have made a pilgrimage to Makkah, Saudi Arabia. A religious leader is called *Mullah* (giver of knowledge). Socioeconomic status can also determine which title to use (such as *Sayb*, meaning "sir"). Some people are respectfully referred to only by a single title (e.g., *Haji*) or by multiple titles (e.g., *Haji sayb*). Usually, however, titles are combined with names. Friends use given names and nicknames among themselves.

### Gestures

Afghans do not use the hands much while speaking. During conversation, men often finger worry beads (*tasbe*), which are believed to bring strength from *Allah*. Male friends link arms or hold hands while walking, but members of the opposite sex do not touch in public. To beckon a person, one motions downward with the palm of the hand facing down. To request divine assistance at the beginning or end of an activity (trip, meal, project), one holds both hands in front of the chest, palms up as if holding a book. Afghans typically sit with legs crossed but make sure not to point the soles of the feet toward someone else, as doing so is impolite. Using the left hand for passing items is considered unclean.

### Visiting

Visiting between family, friends, and neighbors provides the mainstay of Afghan social life. Women are sometimes required to spend their lives in *purdah* (curtain), which means

that they are not seen by males who are not close family members and that visiting is mostly segregated by gender.

Homes often have a special room (*hujra*) where the male host receives male guests. Females socialize elsewhere in the compound. Hosts serve guests tea, and depending on the time of day, something to eat. It is polite for guests to have more than one cup of tea. Any business discussions occur after refreshments. Guests do not bring gifts. The ability of an Afghan to generously receive guests is a sign of social status.

### Eating

At meals, Afghans usually sit on the floor around a mat on which food is served in a communal dish. To eat, one uses the fingers of the right hand or a piece of *nan* (unleavened bread). One never uses the left hand to serve oneself, as it is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene. One eats until satisfied, and leftover food is saved for later or the next day's breakfast. In many areas, belches are considered a sign of a satisfied diner. Families normally eat together, but if a male guest is present, females eat separately. Most Afghans do not eat at restaurants, but some restaurants have booths or a separate dining area for families so women may dine out.

## LIFESTYLE

### Family

Life centers on the extended family, which provides the basis for most social, economic, and political interaction. The rural family may be quite large. Often several generations live together in the same, adjoining, or nearby compounds. Within the compound, the senior male (father or grandfather) leads the family. Household tasks are divided by gender, age, and experience. Women do all the cooking, washing, and cleaning. They may engage in light farming, but their lives center on the household. The wife of the senior male is the dominant female. Males work in the fields or family business and handle most contacts with the outside world. Only adult males participate in the *jirga* (village council) or other political events, but women are well-informed about local happenings and are influential in shaping men's opinions.

### Housing

The most common dwelling is a mud-brick structure of several rooms. The structure is surrounded by high mud walls, which provide security from enemies, seclusion for women, and a pen for animals. The rooms are arranged around an open courtyard. There is usually one entrance from the outside, through which visitors enter into a greeting room. Next to this is a relatively large area, where male guests can talk away from the women's quarters. Among the other rooms is a kitchen, or oven room (*tandur xana*), where bread is baked in an underground oven and the family gathers to keep warm on cold winter days. In Kabul and other large cities, there are also Western-style dwellings. Nomadic groups such as Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Baluchi live in tents. An aging energy infrastructure causes frequent power outages, leaving some areas without electricity for all but a few hours per day.

### Dating and Marriage

Dating is nonexistent because the sexes are segregated at puberty. Marriages normally are arranged, and often older females play a prominent role in the decision. Among urban or Westernized families, the prospective bride and groom may be permitted to meet or view each other and approve or reject the union. They also learn about a prospect from family informants. Marriages between cousins are common because they strengthen family ties. Matchmakers engage in lengthy negotiations over the bride-price (paid by the groom's family to the bride's) and/or dowry (what the bride brings to the marriage).

Marriage and engagement rituals are numerous, varied, and complex. Traditionally the wedding lasts three days, with some festivities at the bride's family home and some at the groom's. Most activities occur with the sexes segregated, but all gather for the contract signing and *Qur'an* recitation. Divorce is simple (the man need only announce it in public three times) but rare. A man may have as many as four wives, but he must care for each equally; this limits most men to one wife. Premarital and extramarital sex are strictly forbidden and may be grounds for severe punishment (including death).

### Life Cycle

The traditional view of life and death is strongly influenced by Islam. Afghans believe that *Allah* created all human souls and decided in advance when each would be born. The *Qur'an* encourages people to marry and have children. Having many children, particularly sons, brings a family great pride. Afghans believe that the time of death is, like birth, determined by *Allah*. Thus old age, illness, or accident are not considered the real causes of death. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death itself as a negative event, as Afghans believe that a person who has lived a good life goes on to live in heaven.

### Diet

Traditional Afghan cuisine is influenced by the foods of South and central Asia, China, and Iran. Traditional meals include many types of *pilau* (rice mixed with meat and/or vegetables), *qorma* (meat sauce), *kebab* (skewered meat), *ashak* or *mantu* (pasta dishes), and *nan*. Tomatoes, spinach, potatoes, peas, carrots, cucumbers, and eggplant are popular. Yogurt and other dairy products are dietary staples. People may snack on sugarcane, pudding, or a variety of nuts, seeds, and fruits (fresh and dried), such as apples, grapes, apricots, or oranges. *Chai* (tea), either green or black, is the most popular drink. An urban diet is usually more varied than a rural diet, but shortages are severe at times—if not of food, then of money to buy it. Islamic law forbids the consumption of alcohol and pork, and most people comply. Some men might smoke local tobacco or chew *naswar* (chewing tobacco); a few may smoke hashish or opium, although Islam forbids drug use.

### Recreation

Afghans have a love for sports, particularly wrestling, soccer, and volleyball. Only men may play sports. Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan introduced cricket in the 1990s, and

teams were organized in several cities. Afghanistan's traditional national sport is *buzkashi*, a central Asian precursor to polo, in which teams of horsemen compete to see who can carry the headless carcass of a calf from a circle to a spot a few hundred feet away and return it to the circle. Any player in possession of the calf will suffer all manner of abuse to make him drop it. Only truly superb horsemen are able to master the game. In rural areas, *achawel* is popular. Players compete to see who can throw a round stone the farthest.

### The Arts

Persian carpets, copper utensils, gold and silver jewelry, and embroidery are traditional Afghan arts, but years of war and instability largely prevented people from creating these works. Elaborate calligraphy once adorned many buildings. Buddhist, Hindu, and other pre-Islamic religious statues and other works of religious art were destroyed by the Taliban.

Traditional music follows regional and ethnic divisions. All groups play music based on stringed instruments such as the *rebab* (a banjo-type, skin-covered instrument), the *tambur* (a long, multi-stringed lute), and the *dutar* (a two-stringed lute) as well as singing and drums. The *attan*, originally a Pashtun dance, is performed at feasts and other celebrations.

One of the first great literary works in Dari was *Shah Nama (Book of the Kings)*, completed in AD 1010 by Ferdosi. Also respected are the *munajat* (prayer verses) written by Kwaja Abdullah Ansarai. Modern writers have focused on themes of Islam and freedom. Proverbs, poetry, and riddles are popular, and folktales are a key form of teaching and entertainment.

### Holidays

Secular holidays include *Nawrooz* (New Year's, in the spring), Victory of the Muslim Nation (28 Apr.), and Independence Day (18 Aug.). Islamic holidays are more important and are scheduled according to the lunar calendar. They include the first day of the holy month of *Ramadan*, the three-day feast (*Eid al-Fitr*) at the end of *Ramadan*, *Eid al-Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice, honoring Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son), *Ashura* (a Shi'i day to mark the martyrdom of Imam Husayn), and *Roze-Maulud* (the birthday of the prophet Muhammad). During *Ramadan*, people fast from dawn to dusk; families and friends gather in the evenings, after sundown, to eat and visit. Friday (called *Joma*) is a day for special prayers and religious study, and many Afghans have this day off from work.

## SOCIETY

### Government

Afghanistan's president (currently Hamid Karzai) is chief of state and head of government. The president is directly elected to a five-year term. A new constitution was approved by a *Loya Jirga* (Grand Council) of locally elected and tribal officials in January 2004. The *Loya Jirga* convenes only to discuss special issues, such as constitutional amendments. The constitution provides for a strong presidency and a bicameral National Assembly, which consists of a 249-seat

*Wolesi Jirga* (House of People) and a 102-seat *Meshrano Jirga* (House of Elders). All citizens age 18 and older may vote. Tribal leadership and loyalty remain strong. In rural areas, tribal leaders are considered more important than the national government, which has limited authority outside of Kabul.

**Economy**

Afghanistan's economy relies on agriculture, pastoralism (livestock raising), and mining, with the bulk of the labor force engaged in these activities. Agricultural products are mostly for domestic consumption. Exports include fruits, nuts, precious and semi-precious gems, natural gas, and textiles. Afghan carpets and embroidered clothing are well-known. Major trading partners include the former Soviet republics of central Asia. High-profit opium/heroin production is a major, though illegal, industry.

Instability has hurt prospects for development and has restricted vital foreign investment. Still, Western oil and gas companies view Afghanistan as an important future conduit for central Asian pipelines. Poverty affects most of the population, and many families are in desperate situations. Economic infrastructure is underdeveloped and in disrepair, and building a viable economy will require substantial effort. The currency is the *afghani* (AFA), but different currencies are used in different areas.

**Transportation and Communications**

The strategic Ring Road, Afghanistan's one major road, creates a large "U" as it runs south from Herat to Kandahar, northeast to Kabul, and then north through the Salang Tunnel (at 11,100 feet in elevation) to Kunduz, and on to Mazar-i-Sharif. Paved roads run from these major cities to the nearest border towns; for example, one runs from Kabul through Jalalabad to the Khyber Pass on the Pakistani border. These roads have been substantially damaged in the war, and efforts are underway to rebuild them. Off-road travel is dangerous because of the millions of land mines buried throughout the country. Many rural areas are essentially inaccessible to vehicles, so people walk, ride animals, or use horse-drawn carts. Buses and minibuses provide transportation in cities and over major transit routes. Few Afghans own private cars. Radio and television have grown exponentially since the Taliban was removed from power. People listen to radio broadcasts and watch television programs from neighboring countries, as well as from fledgling Afghan stations. Many Afghans regularly listen to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) news. Phone and postal services are limited but functioning. Many areas lack electricity.

**Education**

Opportunities for education are few but increasing. Afghanistan's wars kept school attendance to below 10 percent. Literacy is now estimated to be 43 percent for men and 13 percent for women. Many scholars and teachers fled or were killed during the Soviet-Afghan War or during the civil war. The Taliban banned girls from school and shut down private home schools. This affected mostly urban girls,

since rural girls were rarely ever enrolled. The government, working in conjunction with international aid agencies, is reopening schools for both males and females. In areas that struggle with Taliban insurgencies, most schools have been shut down.

**Health**

Medical services are extremely limited. Hospitals are found only in some cities, and these lack heat, qualified staff, medicine, and equipment. Patients' families must provide their own supplies and medicine. Rural areas completely lack modern medical care. Only international aid groups offer some services. Children are undernourished, and many die before they turn one year old. Water is not safe and many diseases affect the population.

**AT A GLANCE**

**Contact Information**

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**POPULATION & AREA**

Population	29,121,286 (rank=41)
Area, sq. mi.	251,827 (rank=42)
Area, sq. km.	652,230

**DEVELOPMENT DATA**

Human Dev. Index* rank	155 of 182 countries
Gender inequality rank	134 of 155 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$900
Adult literacy rate	43% (male); 13% (female)
Infant mortality rate	152 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	44 (male); 45 (female)

\*UN Development Programme, Human Development Report 2010 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).