

Islamic Republic of Afghanistan

Key Geographic, Historic, and Demographic Information

Basic Facts

Population: 39.9 million as of August 2021

Capital: Kabul

Official language: Pashto and Dari

National holiday: 19 August

Geography

Afghanistan is a landlocked and mountainous country in Central Asia about three times bigger than the UK. It borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China, Pakistan, and Iran.

Afghanistan is mostly arid, with large deserts in the west and southwest, and forests and green spaces in the north and parts of the east. The climate varies from tropical to cold; the west can be very hot while in the northeast the snow never melts on the highlands.



Historic Influences

Afghanistan was historically known as Ariana. The name Afghanistan was introduced only in the 19th century. Urban civilization began in the region around 2000 B.C.E. The region was controlled by a series of different dynasties, each one initiating the arrival of different cultural and religious groups.

It is believed the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism may have originated in Afghanistan. The later Indian Maura empire saw Buddhist influences take root. The 7th century Umayyad dynasty propagated Islam in the region, which remains the most commonly practiced religion in the country today.



Note on maps: These maps are for illustration purposes only. The boundaries and names shown and the designations used do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the International Organization for Migration.

Cultural Groups

As a result of this history, Afghanistan has a rich mix of ethnic and cultural groups, with no single ethnic group making up a majority of the population. The constitution refers to 14 different ethnic groups, with still more identified outside of these groups.

Not all of the large number of different ethnic and cultural groups in Afghanistan can therefore be shown in this handout; below is a non-exhaustive list. Please note that some of the pictures may show traditional or celebratory dress rather than daily clothing.

Pashtun



Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan. They are estimated to make up around 42% of the population and they live mainly in the south and east of the country. Pashtuns are considered the most politically dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan; however, they have never formed a homogenous group and are very diverse. This is highlighted by the fact that tribalism is prevalent among Pashtuns. Major tribes are Ahmadzai and Mangal. Kuchis are also a nomadic tribe of Pashtuns.

Pashtuns have a distinct language called Pashto (an official language since 1936). Many Pashtuns are also able to speak Farsi/Dari when necessary. The vast majority of Pashtuns are Sunni Muslims.

Tajik



Tajiks are an ethnic group which make up about 27% of the population. They reside mostly in the central, north, and east of the country. Tajiks speak Dari, and most are Sunni Muslims.

Uzbek



Uzbeks are estimated to make up 9% of the population. They live mainly in the northern part of Afghanistan. They speak their own language - Uzbek, which is a Turkic dialect. The majority are Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi tradition. Many are farmers by occupation, although they are also famous for making carpets.

related to the people of modern Turkey. They were originally a purely tribal society. However, in more recent years they have adopted a semi-nomadic lifestyle. Uzbek and Turkman are closely related ethnic groups.

Hazara



It is estimated that Hazaras make up about 9% of the Afghan population. However, in the 19th century they were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan at 67% of the population. Hazaras speak a dialect of Dari (Farsi dialect) called Hazaragi. The majority of Hazaras live in Hazarajat (or Hazarestan), meaning 'land of the Hazara', which is situated in the rugged central mountainous core of Afghanistan. Others live in the Badakhshan mountains.

Turkman

Turkmen are estimated to constitute 3% of the population. They live mainly in the Northern part of Afghanistan. Turkmen are predominantly Sunni Muslim of the Hanafi tradition and are closely



Aimaq



The Aimaq are a relatively small but diverse population, divided into many different sub-groups. They are traditionally nomadic, however they are now mainly semi-nomadic, travelling only in certain seasons. They are mostly Sunni Muslims and speak a dialect of Persian mixed with Turkic.

Their main source of livelihood is carpet weaving. However, it is interesting to note that in Aimaq culture, wealth is still measured by the number of livestock someone owns thanks to their farming heritage.

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