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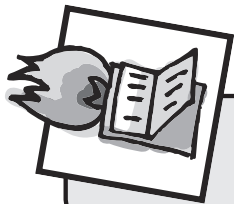
Afghanistan



Welcome to Afghanistan!


Afghanistan is an ancient land situated in between the Middle East, Central Asia, and India. Its location made it an important part of the Silk Road network of trade routes across Asia. But this also made it open to attack. The instability of constantly being invaded has carried into the present day.

Afghanistan is now one of the world's major hot spots. The years of war, coups, and terrorist Taliban rule have all but destroyed the economy and forced many people to flee. The current government is struggling to rebuild and unite the country with the help of foreign governments.



FAST FACTS

Official Name:	Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
Location:	Located in south-central Asia, Afghanistan is a land-locked country bordered by Iran in the west; Pakistan in the south and east; Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan in the north; and China in the far northeast.
Population:	29,835,392 (2010 estimate)
Capital City:	Kabul
Area:	251,882 square miles
Major Languages:	Afghan Persian or Dari (official): 50% Pashto (official): 35% Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen): 11% Many Afghans are bilingual. Many now also speak English.
Major Religions:	Islam (the official religion): 99% Followers of Islam are called Muslims. In Afghanistan, 80% of the people are Sunni Muslim; 19% are Shi'ite Muslim.
Currency:	the <i>Afghani</i> 1 Afghani = 100 <i>pul</i>
Climate:	arid to semiarid, with cold winters and hot summers
The Land:	mostly rugged mountains; plains in the north and southwest
Type of Government:	Islamic republic

Flag:  The Afghan flag has three equal vertical bands of black (on the hoist side), red, and green. The country's national emblem, in white, is centered on the red band. The center of the emblem features a mosque (the Islamic house of worship) with a pulpit and flags on each side. Below the mosque are numbers for the solar year 1298. This is 1919, the year that Afghanistan became independent. This whole central image is encircled by a border of wheat sheaves.

In the upper center is the *Shahada* (the Islamic declaration of faith), in Arabic. It says, "There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah." Underneath the *Shahada* are rays of the rising sun over the *Takbir* (the Arabic expression that means "God is great"). At the bottom center of the flag is a scroll bearing the name *Afghanistan*.

Emblem:



Afghanistan's Coat of Arms displays, on a red background, an image similar to the central image on its flag.

National Animals:

Marco Polo Sheep (national animal)
Eagle (national bird)
Lion (official animal)

Motto:

"There is no god but Allah. Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah."

Natural Environment

Afghanistan has extremely rugged mountains and a lot of dry, inhospitable land. The Hindu Kush is the most important mountain range, with peaks that soar to more than 20,000 feet. The range extends about 600 miles from the northeast to the southwest. Damaging earthquakes occur in the Hindu Kush Mountains. In a May 31, 1998 earthquake, for example, some 4,000 people were killed.

The Hindu Kush mountains divide Afghanistan into three regions: the Central Highlands, which make up two thirds of the country's area; the Southwestern Plateau, which makes up one-fourth of the country's area; and the Northern Plains area, which has the richest soil. The south and southwest are stretches of desert that include the dry, dusty regions of Sesitan and Registan. The Sisan Basin is one of the driest regions in the world.

Afghanistan relies on four major rivers: the Amu Darya on the northern border, the Kabul in the east, the Helmand in the south, and the Harirud, which forms part of the border with Iran in the west. For the most part, these rivers can't be used for transportation.

The climate varies according to elevation and location. There are very harsh winters in the north and in the Central Highlands. Southern Afghanistan has less severe winters and very hot summers. The whole country only gets about two to ten inches of rain and snow each year.

Afghanistan has vast mineral and energy resources that are mostly untouched because of the country's political situation. There are gold, silver, copper, zinc, and iron ore deposits in the southeast. In the northeast are deposits of beautiful gemstones like emerald and the rare blue lapis lazuli. There are large petroleum and natural gas reserves in the north. The government is making plans to extract these resources in order to help boost the country's economy.

Plants and Animals

Most Afghans make a living by farming, but only about ten percent of the land is cultivated. Much of it has been damaged so badly by war that it will take a lot of work to replenish the soil. Crops include wheat, fruits like figs and dates, and nuts like almonds. Afghanistan abounds in plants, like wormwood, that are used to treat diseases such as malaria.

Afghanistan's largest crop, however, is the opium poppy. This is sold to the world's illegal drug trade to make heroin, a dangerous drug. The Taliban and other anti-government groups in Afghanistan get a great deal of money from the opium trade. The current government is working hard to control this by banning the growing of poppies and giving the farmers money for not planting them.

Decades of war, hunting, and drought have reduced the wildlife population in Afghanistan. The tigers that used to roam the grasslands, for example, are now extinct. Bears and wolves are close to extinction, and the snow leopards of the Hindu Kush are endangered. The remaining native animals include the fox, lynx, wild dog, bear, mongoose, hyena, hare, wild cats, mules, mountain goats, and mountain sheep. The sheep are very important because they supply wool for clothing and meat for food. Trout is the most common fish. There are more than 100 species of wildfowl and birds.

The large, graceful Afghan hound is found in northern Afghanistan, where shepherds use them to protect their sheep from wolves. These beautiful dogs are long and lean like greyhounds. They're popular with dog-lovers around the world.



Afghan Hound



A HISTORY OF AFGHANISTAN

Early History

Humans were living in Afghanistan about 50,000 years ago in some of the world's oldest farming areas. The country's location between Iran, central Asia, and India made it an important part of the Silk Road trade routes across Asia. This has also made it a target for conquerors. Over the past 2,000 years, the Persians, the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and the Mongols under Genghis Khan all conquered Afghanistan—among many others.

By the seventh century CE, the Muslims were conquering the country and founding various short-lived dynasties. Buddhism spread from India into the Bamiyan Valley and remained strong until the tenth century. But the country became Muslim, and it still is today.

In 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani, an Afghan tribal leader, established a united country that covers most of today's Afghanistan. The descendants of the Durrani make up about 16 percent of Afghanistan's population today.

Roots of Modern Afghanistan

The Durrani dynasty ended in 1818. Dost Muhammad became *emir* (ruler) in 1826. During his rule, Afghanistan got caught in a struggle between Russia and Britain, who wanted territory and influence in central Asia.

The British tried to replace Dost Muhammad with a former emir, which caused the first Afghan War (1838 to 1842) between the British and the Afghans. Dost Muhammad was deposed. But he was restored to power and signed an agreement with the British in 1857. He died in 1863 and was succeeded by his third son, Sher Ali.

The Russians began acquiring territory that bordered on the Amy Darya River, which now forms the northern border of Afghanistan. Sher Ali and the British quarreled, and the second Afghan War began in 1878. Sher Ali died in 1879.

Eventually Abdur Rahman Khan served as emir from 1880 until his death in 1901, and the country was unified. Border agreements were reached with Russia, India, and Persia. Abdur Rahman Khan was succeeded by his son Habibullah, who was assassinated in 1919. His successor, Amanullah, tried to free the country of British rule and invaded British-controlled India in 1919. This third Afghan War ended with the Treaty of Rawalpindi, which set Afghanistan free. It formed an independent monarchy in 1921.