BACKGROUND

Land and Climate
Located in central Asia, Afghanistan is a little larger than France and a little smaller than the U.S. state of Texas. Afghanistan is a landlocked country of rugged mountains. The most prominent mountain range is the Hindu Kush, which extends about 600 miles (966 kilometers) from the far northeast to the southwest, effectively bisecting the country. Mount Noshan, which lies on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, is Afghanistan's highest peak and reaches 24,580 feet (7,492 meters).

The Wakhan Corridor (the extreme northeasterly part of Afghanistan, which borders China, Tajikistan, and Pakistan) sits at the junction of the highest mountain systems in the world (including the Himalayas, Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and others), which together are sometimes called the "roof of the world." 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. Northern Afghanistan is subject to major earthquake activity.

For water, Afghanistan relies on four major river systems: the Amu Darya, the Kabul, the Helmand, and the Hari Rud. Many villages in Afghanistan use a qanat well system (a string of connected wells) to irrigate more arid parts of the country. About 12 percent of the country’s land is arable.

The climate varies according to elevation and location. Generally, the capital city of Kabul (at 5,873 feet, or 1,790 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. Central and northeastern Afghanistan experience heavy snowfall during winter.

History
Ancient Empire and Early Dynasties
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 repeated invasion. Emperors and conquerors (Persians, Greeks, central Asians, and others) throughout history have attempted to control or pacify the region’s inhabitants, most often finding them fiercely independent and formidable military opponents aided by the country's natural defense—mountains.

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 (also known as Timur) established the Timurid Dynasty (1370–1506), famed for its arts and architecture. The Mughal Dynasty (1526–1707) rose to control eastern Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent, while the Persian Safavid Dynasty (1501–1732) held western Afghanistan. Afghanistan's roots as a modern state are in the Durrani Dynasty, founded in 1747 by Ahmad Shah Durrani.

The Great Game and Independence
During Durrani’s reign, Afghanistan was caught in the 19th-century struggle for territory and influence between the Russian and British empires (called the Great Game);
Afghanistan was used by the British as a buffer between Russia and India, Britain's colony. While Afghanistan was never ruled by a European power, Britain had nominal control over the country's foreign policy. Afghanistan achieved full independence from Britain after the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919.

Despite the efforts of Shah Amanullah Khan (leader of Afghanistan at independence) to modernize and Westernize the country, his reforms were largely rejected by the conservative religious leaders (for his progressive attitudes, including those toward women) and tribal leaders (who were afraid of a strong centralized government). In 1929, Amanullah was deposed by Habibullah Kalakani, a Tajik who led the revolt against Amanullah. Less than a year after assuming office, Habibullah was overthrown by Muhammad Nadir Shah, who tried to pacify the concerns of the religiously conservative while still implementing reform.

In 1973, Muhammad Zahir Shah, successor and son of Nadir Shah, was ousted by his cousin Prince Muhammad Daoud Khan in a bloodless coup. Daoud established the Republic of Afghanistan and made himself president. During his time in office, Daoud tried to decrease Afghanistan's reliance on the Soviet Union.

**Soviet Era**

Although Daoud was supported by the national Communist Party, the United States and regional powers (including Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran) were concerned about Soviet influence in Afghanistan. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) coordinated with these regional powers to supply and arm local rebel groups in order to counter Soviet power in Afghanistan. For its part, the Soviet Union was concerned about Afghanistan's relationship with the United States and its connection with these Islamic states. Five years after Daoud came to power, the Soviets, in coordination with sympathetic elements in the army, aided in a military coup. Once in power, the Soviet-backed communists instituted a number of reforms that were strongly opposed by many of Afghanistan's devoutly Muslim citizens. Soon, an anti-communist rebellion, which was supported by the United States, broke out in Afghanistan.

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. The Soviet troops withdrew in 1989 and put in place a puppet regime led by Muhammad Najibullah. Following the Soviet withdrawal, civil war broke out between the communist government of Najibullah and Muslim mujahideen (Islamic fighters) from several political parties. In 1992, Najibullah's government was defeated by mujahideen.

**Taliban Rule**

Between 1992 and 1996, different factions of mujahideen in Kabul began fighting each other for control of the country. In 1994, one group of mujahideen, known as the Taliban ("Students," referring to Muslim youth studying Islam), took control of the city of Kandahar and promised to bring order to the city. The Taliban, which received direct support from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and many war-weighy Afghans, consolidated its power and expanded its control over large swathes of territory, capturing Kabul in 1996.

By 2001, the Taliban controlled more than 90 percent of the country. The Northern Alliance, a coalition of militias opposed to the Taliban, kept control over a small area of northern Afghanistan. Despite its dominance, the Taliban saw its support slip as it imposed strict laws based on its interpretation of shari'ah (Islamic law) and on pre-Islamic Pashtun tribal codes.

Following the 2001 September 11th terrorist attacks in the United States, U.S. and British forces joined with the Northern Alliance in a military campaign to oust the Taliban, which was sheltering al-Qaeda terrorists accused of masterminding the attacks. By the end of 2001, the U.S.-led invasion was successful in removing the Taliban from power.

**Struggle for Stability and Security**

Attempts to build a stable democratic government ensued. A constitution was adopted in January 2004, and Afghanistan voted for its first democratically elected president later that year. In the following years, the government of Afghanistan sought to rebuild a devastated infrastructure, bridge longstanding differences among the nation's tribes, and combat a lucrative drug trade (based on the cultivation of opium poppies). These goals, however, largely failed, as the new Afghan government was widely viewed as weak, ineffective, and corrupt.

By the time North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) troops fully assumed control of military operations from the U.S.-led coalition in 2006, insurgent attacks had increased dramatically, as the Taliban started employing suicide bombings and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). As troop and civilian casualties climbed, the war's support in the United States and other NATO countries waned, leading to increased pressure in those nations to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. At the same time, anti-U.S. and anti-Western views became common among Afghans, who increasingly resented their nation's worsening security situation and the presence of foreign troops. NATO's combat mission officially ended in December 2014, when Afghan forces assumed full responsibility for the nation's internal security.

Nevertheless, thousands of NATO-led troops, mostly from the United States, remain in Afghanistan to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces in their counterinsurgency operations. The presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan continues to be controversial. Additionally, the Taliban has regained substantial territory in recent years despite the presence of foreign troops. Peace talks with the Taliban have been unsuccessful thus far. Since the U.S.-led invasion in 2001, tens of thousands of Afghan civilians and more than 100,000 Afghan and Taliban fighters have been killed. And decades of instability and violence have devastated Afghanistan's infrastructure and economy and displaced millions of Afghans.

**THE PEOPLE**

**Population**

Afghanistan's major cities include Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Herat, and Jalalabad. However, the majority of
Afghans live in rural areas. 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.

Afghanistan's largest ethnic group, the Pashtun, can be divided into several major subtribes and live mostly in the east and south. The second-largest ethnic group, the Tajik, live mainly in the north. Uzbek generally live in the north-center, and Hazara in the center. Smaller numbers of Brahui, Kyrgyz, Nuristani, Qizilbash, and Turkmen together account for the rest of the population. Traditionally, the Pashtun have been politically dominant in Afghanistan, including during the reign of the Taliban (though not every member of the Taliban was Pashtun, and not every Pashtun was a member of the Taliban). Smaller ethnic groups formed militias to fight against the Taliban and to secure their own autonomy, such as the Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara.

Language

More than 40 languages are spoken in Afghanistan. Dari (a dialect of Farsi also known as Afghan Persian) is spoken most widely and has several dialects. Pashto, spoken by the Pashtun, has two major variants and many dialects. Dari and Pashto both use a modified Arabic alphabet. Both Dari and Pashto are official languages, and most Afghans speak both. While Dari is more common, Pashto is the language of the national anthem. Depending on the dominant language of the area, school instruction may be in either Dari or Pashto. The Uzbek 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. In some areas with high concentrations of ethnic minorities, there is a third official language—such as Uzbek or Turkmen.

Religion

Islam is the religion of virtually all Afghans. About 85 to 90 percent of Afghans are Sunni Muslims, while between 10 and 15 percent (primarily Hazara and some Dari speakers) are Shiʿi Muslims. Small numbers of Sikhs and Hindus live in urban areas. Zoroastrianism (a faith that was founded by the Iranian prophet Zoroaster in the sixth century BC) was a major religion for centuries in Afghanistan prior to the introduction of Islam in the seventh century, when it was almost completely extinguished. Buddhism, which spread to Afghanistan in the fourth century, was also prominent but gradually faded after Islam was introduced.

Founded by the prophet Muhammad 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 prophet to receive divine revelation from God. Both Sunni and Shiʿi Muslims believe the Qurʾan (Islamic holy book) contains the will of God as revealed through the angel Gabriel to Muhammad. Devout Muslims express their faith through the Five Pillars of Islam: declaring there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet; praying five times daily; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; donating to the poor; and making a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, if they can afford it.

Islam has also played a significant role in Afghanistan's political history. In 1979, the war against the Soviets was considered a war to defend Islam, waged by the mujahideen (Islamic fighters, sometimes called holy warriors). Through the successful defense of Afghanistan by the mujahideen, 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 the Pashtunwali (code of the Pashtuns). The Pashtunwali dictates social behavior in various areas of life and emphasizes the principles of bravery, honor, and generosity. The Pashtunwali serves as an unwritten social code among the Pashtun.

General Attitudes

Although people identify themselves as Afghans, primary loyalty is usually to their family, kin group, clan, or tribe. The various family and tribal 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 (particularly the behavior of women), so living the code properly is considered essential. Piety and stoicism are widely admired traits. Many Afghans highly value knowledge, wisdom, and education.

Traditionally, rural Afghans value wealth as defined by land ownership or a large family. Today, 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.

Many Afghans’ outlook on life is influenced by a great faith that God (Khuda, in Dari and Pashto) controls everything and that everything happens according to his will, a belief that may help some Afghans accept a very hard life.

Personal Appearance

Nearly all men wear Afghanistan's national perahan tunban. This consists of a knee-length shirt (perahan) worn over baggy trousers (tunban) pulled tight with a drawstring. Men may wear a dress coat or open vest (vaskat) over the perahan tunban. Men commonly wear a white shawl called a pato over their shoulders. Shoes are removed for prayers, with the exception of special shoes called mash, worn by some older Afghans.

The most common headwear is a lungi (turban) with a kolah (turban cap) in a color and design that may relate to the wearer's ethnic or regional background. Pashtun and Nuristani men cover their heads with a flat wool cap. Men also commonly have beards (growing beards by adult men was a law under Taliban rule). Many dye their beards red with henna.

Women typically wear a long colorful dress with a short jacket, long coat, and chador (shawl) to cover their hair. Some women wear a head-to-toe covering called a burqa over their clothing; faces are covered by an intricately embroidered window, through which the wearer can see. The burqa was required public attire for all women during the Taliban era and is still prevalent in some areas; the burqa is more common among the Pashtun than among other ethnic groups. In the capital of Kabul, most women do not wear the burqa.
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. Female friends and family members embrace and kiss on alternating cheeks. Some women might also shake hands with each other, but this is not common.

Greetings vary by region and ethnic group, but Arabic greetings are accepted universally. *Assalaam ‘alaikum* (Peace be upon you) is replied to with *Wa ‘alaikum assalaam* (And peace be upon you). A common Dari greeting is *Chetori?* (How are you?); the Pashto equivalent is *Sanga ye?* “Good-bye” is *Khoday paman* in Pashto. "Thank you” is *Tashakoor* in Dari and *Manana* in Pashto.

In formal situations, using a title is essential. *Haji* (pilgrim) is reserved for those who have made a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. A religious cleric is addressed with the title *Mullah* (meaning "master"). Socioeconomic status can also determine which title to use (such as *Saheb*, meaning "sir"). Some people are respectfully referred to only by a single title (for example, *Haji*) or by multiple titles (*Haji saheb*). Usually, however, titles are combined with names. Friends use given names and nicknames among themselves.

### Gestures

Most Afghans do not use the hands much while speaking. During conversation, men often finger prayer beads (*tashbih*), used in praying or in reciting the 99 names of God (*Allah*). Male friends often 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. When shaking hands or eating food, it is generally considered impolite to use the left hand.

### Visiting

Visiting between family, friends, and neighbors provides the mainstay of Afghan social life. Women are sometimes required to observe *purdah* ("curtain," a practice that places physical and social boundaries between men and women), which means that they are not seen by males who are not close family members and that visiting is mostly segregated by gender. Women generally must be accompanied by a male relative when visiting the house of a family member or female friend. Married women who live far from their parents return to visit their families twice a year, usually for several weeks at a time. Winter is a common time to visit family, as there is less farm work.

Homes often have a special room (called *mehman-khana* in Dari, or *kota* in Pashto) 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 *naan* (unleavened bread). Most families bake bread in an oven called a *tandur*, though in some cities, people buy bread from the market. One never uses the left hand to serve oneself, as it is traditionally reserved for personal hygiene. One eats until satisfied. 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 when they are with their families—women do not dine out alone or with friends.

### LIFESTYLE

#### Family

**Structure**

Life centers on the extended family, which provides the basis for most social, economic, and political interaction. The average urban family has five children, but rural families may be much larger. Often several generations live together in the same, adjoining, or nearby compounds. When young men marry, they move out of their parental home and into an adjoining home.

**Parents and Children**

Afghans often have large families, and parents usually view children as a source of pride. Children are expected to respect their parents, and they show that respect in part by being willing to assist in the daily chores. Household tasks are divided by gender, age, and experience. Girls between five and seven years old begin assisting their mothers with daily chores such as cooking and washing. Young boys may assist their fathers with the family business after they return from school. Very poor families may have teenage sons work to help support the family. Adult children continue to pay respect to their parents by spending time with them and seeking their counsel in life decisions. Even if the children live or study far away from the home, weekly visits are expected.

**Gender Roles**

Male family members handle most contact 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. Within family compounds, the senior male (father or grandfather) leads the family. The wife of the senior male is the most influential female in the family.

Afghan women's lives center generally on the household. Although they help in farming, they also do all the cooking, washing, and cleaning. Under the Taliban rule, women did not have access to education, and firmly established customs also prevented women from working. Today, few rural women work outside of their home, but if they do, they are generally employed in the health or education sectors. In urban areas, women commonly work outside of the home as cleaners, office assistants, and occasionally as managers.

Housing

Urban

Kabul and other large cities feature Western-style dwellings. Urban homes are generally made of concrete or brick and usually have a yard surrounding the house. Homes in urban areas typically have three to four bedrooms and one or two bathrooms. Many urban homes are painted bright colors; interiors are often painted white. Homes generally feature rugs, cushions, and pillows, although some homes have sofas.

Urban homes are equipped with appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines and are wired for electricity; however, an aging energy infrastructure causes frequent power outages, leaving some areas without power for all but a few hours per day. Urban homes also have indoor plumbing and modern plumbing fixtures.

Rural

Rural homes are usually made of mud brick and are generally located on much larger plots than urban homes. Nomadic groups such as Turkmen, Kyrgyz, and Baluchi live in tents. Exteriors of rural homes are plastered with mud and straw. Rural compounds are typically surrounded by high mud walls, which provide security from enemies, seclusion for women, and a pen for animals. Rooms are arranged around an open courtyard.

Most rural houses have a kitchen or oven room (tandur khana), where bread is baked in a tandur (underground oven). Most rural homes connect the tandur to an adjacent room (called tawa khana) through vents. The heat from the tandur heats the adjacent room, which is where the family gathers to keep warm on cold winter days. Rural homes do not have access to electricity or running water. Rural families often collect water from nearby streams.

Home Life

Both urban and rural homes have an entrance for visitors that leads to a greeting room (mehman-khana in Dari; kota in Pashto). Next to this is a relatively large area where male guests can talk apart from the women, who have the rest of the house to themselves. Brothers share bedrooms with brothers, and sisters with sisters. Married children have their own room if they live in their parents’ home.

Ownership

Rural residents are more likely to own land and build a home than urban residents, who typically find home ownership to be unattainable due to the high cost of land and building materials in urban areas. Urban residents sometimes share a rented home with another family. Home ownership is a goal that most aspire to.

Dating and Marriage

Marriage Arrangement

Dating is nonexistent because boys and girls are segregated at puberty. Marriages normally are arranged, and often older female family members play a prominent role in arranging a match. In some areas in the south, matchmakers (roybar) may engage in negotiations over the bride-price (paid by the groom’s family to the bride’s) and dowry (property the bride brings to the marriage). 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.

Marriage in Society

Islam encourages its adherents to marry. Afghan law does not dictate a minimum marriage age. Young women generally marry between the ages of 14 and 22, and young men typically marry between 18 and 24. Women are legally able to choose a spouse, but only urban women are regularly allowed to do so; conservative religious families may not allow women to choose their husbands. Marriages between cousins are common because they strengthen family ties. 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 (zinnah) are strictly forbidden for men and women and may be grounds for severe punishment (including death). Sexual relations between same-sex partners are illegal in Afghanistan, and same-sex marriage is not legally recognized.

Weddings

Marriage rituals are numerous, varied, and complex. Most wedding celebrations are held at the bride's family home and some at the groom's home. These traditionally last three days. Most activities occur with the sexes segregated, but all gather for the contract signing and Qur’an (Islamic holy book) recitation, which occurs on the first day of the wedding. Generally held in the presence of only family members, the contract signing ceremony (nikah) binds man and wife together in marriage. The bride and groom kneel in front of an imam (Muslim cleric), who asks the bride three times if she accepts the marriage. The imam recites from the Qur’an to complete the ceremony.

Celebrations begin later in the evening, after the contract ceremony. The newly married couple enters a celebration hall, where they are led by their parents to be seated on cushions. In some tribes (like Pashtun living in the south), the couple may be presented with a mirror, which they lift together to view themselves for the first time as a married couple. The couple may recite from the Qur’an together as well. The groom's father applies henna to their hands, and the bride and groom feed each other sweet food. By tradition, guests and family members are supposed to honor and obey the bride and groom on their wedding day. During the celebrations, the attan (national dance of Afghanistan) is performed by dancing and twirling in a circle.

The traditional Afghan destarkhan (an elaborate spread of food), consisting of skewered meats, rice dishes, stuffed grape leaves, pickled vegetables, and breads, is served during wedding celebrations. In urban areas, the couple cuts the
wedding cake after the meal, often while the wedding musician plays the traditional Afghan wedding song “Baada, Baada Elahee Mubarak Baada. Man Dil Ba Tu Dada Am, Tawakol Ba Khuda” (Congratulations, I gave you my heart; now I leave it to God). Three days after the ceremony, the bride and groom receive guests at their home or a hotel. Guests bring gifts, generally household items.

**Divorce**

Divorce is much easier for men to obtain than women. In the past, according to Islamic tradition, the man needed only to publicly announce three times his decision to divorce his wife. Today, Afghan men are required by law to formalize a divorce by signing official documents, rather than issuing a verbal proclamation three times. Women find it difficult to initiate divorces, and few women do. To initiate a divorce, women must petition a court, who will then rule on her case. The larger problem for women is the social stigma she will face after divorce. Remarriage for women is possible, but if the woman is widowed early in life, her husband’s family may insist that she marry one of his brothers.

**Life Cycle**

**Birth**

The traditional view of life and death is strongly influenced by Islam. In general, Afghans believe that God created all human souls and decided in advance when each would be born. On the sixth day after a birth, relatives and neighbors gather for a shab-e-shash, during which a mullah (local religious cleric) whispers Allahu akbar (God is most great) in the child’s ear. The father announces the name of the child to the guests and asks them to pray for the health of his child. Afghans commonly choose Muslim names for their children. Guests bring presents for the new baby. After a child is born, the mother recovers for 40 days (a period called nefas), after which she performs a ritual bath and gets new clothes. Women get 90 days of paid maternity leave; however, men do not receive paternity leave.

**Milestones**

For boys and girls, puberty generally marks the transition into adulthood (often between 12 and 16 years old). When young men become adults, they are expected to earn money and contribute to the family income. Girls are expected to stay within the family compound and help their mothers with household chores.

**Death**

Most Afghans believe that the time of death, like birth, is determined by God. 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 most Afghans believe that a person who has lived a good life goes on to live in heaven.

The deceased are washed by family members of the same sex and wrapped in a white shroud. A jenaze (funeral) is held and features prayer services at a local mosque. The deceased is buried on his or her right side, facing Mecca, Saudi Arabia. Families may continue receiving people who wish to offer their condolences for three days after the burial. On the first Friday and the 40th day after the death, a mullah offers special prayers for the deceased at a mosque.

**Diet**

Traditional Afghan cuisine is influenced by the foods of south and central Asia, China, and Iran. Traditional meals include many types of palaw (rice mixed with meat and/or vegetables), gorma (meat sauce), kebab (skewered meat), ashak (meat-filled dumplings), mantu (chive-filled dumplings), and naan ( unleavened bread). 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 of food or the money to buy it are severe at times. Islamic law forbids the consumption of alcohol and pork; however, while most Afghans don't eat pork, some may drink alcohol in private.

**Recreation**

**Sports**

Many Afghans have a love for sports. Although participation tends to be limited to males (particularly in rural areas), some urban women play sports. Popular sports include soccer and volleyball. In the 1990s, Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan introduced cricket, and teams have been organized in several cities. Men and boys also play a variation of rugby in which two teams face each other and one person tries to rush over and break through the opposing team.

Buzkashi, Afghanistan’s traditional national sport, is most commonly played in northern Afghanistan and during national celebrations. Teams of horsemen compete to see who can carry the headless carcass of a goat or calf from a circle to a spot a few hundred feet away and return it to the circle. Any player in possession of the carcass is subject to being kicked or hit in efforts to make him drop it. Mastery of the game requires superior horsemanship skills. Pehlwani is a form of wrestling and often accompanies buzkashi matches; one tries to pin one’s opponent to the ground without touching his legs.

**Leisure**

Afghan men enjoy discussing national and international news or talking and sharing jokes with friends and neighbors. Some men might smoke, chew naswar (chewing tobacco), or drink tea while relaxing. Women also sip tea while visiting friends and family during their leisure time.

Children’s games in Afghanistan include tag, blind man’s bluff, kite flying, and hopscotch. In rural areas, achowel is a popular game in which players compete to see who can throw a round stone the farthest. Another rural game is gursai, in which players hold their left foot in their right hand and hop about trying to push each other over. Girls often enjoy playing with homemade dolls, while boys play soccer or make slingshots. A game called buzul-bazi, similar to marbles, uses sheep knuckle bones. In winter, Afghan children enjoy having snowball fights. Some people also ski near Kabul.

**The Arts**
Afghan carpets, copper utensils, gold and silver jewelry, and embroidery are traditional Afghan arts, but years of war and instability have largely prevented people from creating these works. Elaborate calligraphy once adorned many buildings. Many 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-like, 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 commonly 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 the poet Ferdowsi. Also respected are the Munajat (prayer verses) written by Khwaja 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 Nowruz (the New Year, celebrated in the spring), Mujahideen Victory Day (28 April), and Independence Day (19 August). Islamic holidays are more prominent and are scheduled according to a 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), Ashura (a Muslim fasting holiday), Roze-Maulud (also known as al-Mawlid al-Nabawi, the prophet Muhammad’s birthday), and Arafa (a day of fasting). During most holidays, Afghans usually visit friends and family, prepare lavish meals, and, for Islamic holidays, attend special prayer services held at mosques. The rest of the day is spent preparing and enjoying meals with friends and family.

**Mujahideen Victory Day**

Mujahideen Victory Day is an official holiday for all Afghans but is primarily celebrated by the government. The day commemorates the 1992 overthrow of the Russian-backed socialist government in Afghanistan. Celebrations may include military parades and sports competitions, including buzkashi (“goat grabbing,” Afghanistan's national sport), boxing, and karate. There may also be a competition for dancers of the attan (the national dance).

**Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr**

During Ramadan (the ninth month of the lunar calendar), people fast from dawn to dusk; families and friends gather in the evenings, after sundown, to eat and visit. Eid al-Fitr is celebrated at the end of the month of fasting. Many begin the day by wearing new clothes, and men go to mosques for prayers. Afterward, people visit and entertain their friends and families. Children usually receive gifts or money called eidi.

**Eid al-Adha**

Several months after Ramadan, Eid al-Adha (celebrated during the twelfth month of the lunar calendar) honors the prophet Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son. Eid al-Adha is celebrated in much the same way as Eid al-Fitr: people visit friends and family, and gifts are exchanged. Many families slaughter a sheep on this day as a symbol of the story of Abraham. Families who cannot afford their own animal may join other families and pool their money together to buy an animal. The meat from the sacrifice is shared with family and friends; a portion must also be reserved for the poor. In rural areas, people gather (usually segregated by gender) for a village breakfast or other festivities, often dressing in new clothes. Throughout the country, people attend special prayer services held at mosques. The rest of the day is spent preparing and enjoying meals with friends and family.

**Day of Ashura**

Ashura (celebrated during the first month of the lunar calendar) commemorates the martyrdom of the prophet Muhammad’s grandson Husayn and his followers at the battle of Karbala. People donate meals to the poor during this holiday. Although banned by religious leaders, there are also processions where men whip themselves. While Ashura is commemorated in both Sunni and Shi’i Islam, it has especial significance in Shi’i Islam.

**SOCIETY**

**Government**

**Structure**

Afghanistan's president is head of state and head of government. The president is directly elected to a five-year term. The president shares some powers with a chief executive officer (CEO), a position that is similar to a prime minister. 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). Wolesi Jirga members are directly elected to serve five-year terms, with a number of seats reserved for women. A third of Meshrano Jirga members are elected indirectly by district councils and serve three-year terms, while another third are indirectly elected by provincial councils and serve four-year terms; the final third (seventeen of which must be women) are nominated by the president and serve five-year terms.

**Political Landscape**

Though a large number of political parties exist in Afghanistan, most lack widespread public support and only represent the interests of specific ethnic groups. Political competition is low, as groups have failed to form coalitions and platforms that draw a large number of supporters. Political alliances are largely based on ethnic ties. 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.

**Government and the People**

Though the constitution guarantees many freedoms, in practice freedoms of speech, association, religion, and press are not respected. Corruption, cronyism, and poor rule of law are major issues challenging the stability and functionality of
the country’s government. Both national and provincial governments struggle to provide basic services or control areas under their jurisdiction. Elections are often blemished by voting inconsistencies and fraud. Election turnout is often low and results are limited, as the country remains insecure and unstable. All citizens age 18 and older may vote.

Economy
Since 2014, Afghanistan's economy, which is highly dependent on foreign aid, has declined, further impoverishing the country. This is largely due to the withdrawal of nearly 100,000 foreign troops that gave a much-needed boost to the Afghan economy. Since 2003, various countries have donated billions of dollars in international aid to Afghanistan; however, poverty still affects more than half of the population. Afghans face challenges in finding employment, in addition to shortages in housing, sanitary water, electricity, and health care.

Afghanistan’s economy relies on agriculture, pastoralism (livestock raising), and mining, with the bulk of the labor force engaged in these activities. Although Afghanistan has substantial mineral reserves, weak infrastructure and political instability have prevented the country from capitalizing on them. Agricultural products are mostly for domestic consumption. Exports include fruits, nuts, handwoven carpets, wool, cotton, hides and pelts, precious and semi-precious gems, and medical herbs. Afghan carpets and embroidered clothing are well-known. Major trading partners include India, Pakistan, China, and Iran.

High-profit opium and heroin production is a major, though illegal, industry, contributing roughly one-third of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). For farmers, illicit poppy production is more lucrative than wheat and other food crops. This creates a shortage of locally produced grain and food crops, which necessitates additional food imports, thus compounding Afghanistan's economic problems. Opiates made from poppies grown in Afghanistan comprise the vast majority of illicit opiate sales in the world. Afghanistan's currency is the afghani (AFN).

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 11,200 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 in many areas because of the high number of land mines buried throughout the country (estimated to be around 640,000). 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.

Due to Afghanistan's poor literacy rate, newspaper circulation and readership is low. However, broadcast media have grown significantly since the Taliban was removed from power, with nearly two hundred radio stations and dozens of TV stations active today. People also listen to radio broadcasts and watch television programs from neighboring countries. Many Afghans regularly listen to the news from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), which has broadcasts in Dari and Pashto; the BBC has a reputation among Afghans as a reliable and relatively unbiased media source.

Content that goes against Islamic teachings or is offensive to other religions is prohibited. Although media freedom has generally improved with a wide variety of views and perspectives, journalists face growing dangers of being attacked, so many practice self-censorship. Some Afghans are active on social media and blogs and discuss social and political issues. Phone and postal services are limited but functioning. Cellular phone use is increasing; more than half of the population has cellular phones. Few Afghans have access to the internet.

Education
Structure
Education in Afghanistan includes primary school and secondary school, followed by high school and university. Primary school covers classes 1–6 (ages 6–12), secondary school includes classes 7–9 (ages 13–15), and high school is comprised of classes 10–12 (ages 16–18). Most universities are four-year institutions. There is no mandatory level of education; however, most people value education and want to send their children to as much schooling as they can.

Access
Most schools are government supported and free to attend. However, students are responsible for providing their own materials, uniforms, and lunches; they must also pay transportation fees and, if needed, buy their own books. These costs can be prohibitive for some. Private schools have recently become available, but their high fees make them inaccessible to most of the population.

The Ministry of Education, in cooperation with international aid agencies, is working to provide education to everyone; however, rural areas suffer from a lack of buildings and other resources. Roughly half of school-age children attend school, though there are significant disparities between urban and rural settings as well as genders. In rural areas, for example, when the school is far from the home, families may refuse to let their daughters travel long distances alone. More traditional families may discourage their daughters from pursuing education or may disallow it altogether. In areas that struggle with Taliban insurgencies (particularly the south), girls are prohibited from going to school and most schools have been shut down. This affects mostly urban girls, since rural girls are rarely ever enrolled. Qualified teachers—particularly female ones—are lacking. Many scholars and teachers fled or were killed during the Soviet-Afghan War or during the civil war.

School Life
Schools offer courses such as religion, mathematics, biology, chemistry, and languages (Dari, Pashto, and Arabic). English is taught as well, but only at basic levels. English is the most common language of instruction at private institutions. Boys
and girls study the same curriculum, except for a girls-only class called home management. Boys and girls are segregated by gender after primary school. Children have nightly homework in each subject, which can take several hours to complete. Students are further challenged because many families require their children's assistance with a family business, working the family's agricultural land, or carrying out other domestic responsibilities, which leaves little time for study.

Teaching styles tend to be lecture-based, with an emphasis on memorization. Teachers must sometimes focus only on theory, leaving little opportunity to demonstrate scientific principles in action, due to insufficient supplies and inadequate facilities. However, most schools have basic classroom supplies, and private schools may also incorporate technology in their instruction. Tests are the common metric for determining a student's progress. Cheating is not common and is not acceptable to society; it is punished when discovered. Students are respectful to their teachers, who are referred to as Malam (Teacher). Some teachers assist their students outside of the classroom.

**Higher Education**

After completing class 12, students earn a baccalaureate certificate. The baccalaureate enables a student to participate in university preparation courses to take the university entrance exam (the Kankor Exam). The baccalaureate also enables a person to be hired by the government in entry-level positions. There are several major universities; most are located in Kabul, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Herat, and Jalalabad.

**Health**

Though improvements have been made to Afghanistan's healthcare system in recent years, the general health situation remains poor. 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. International aid groups and community healthcare workers organize awareness campaigns and provide health services but have limited means. People who can afford to do so go to India or Pakistan for medical treatment.

Children are often undernourished, and many die before they turn five years old. Maternal mortality rates also remain high. Water is not safe, and many illnesses like dysentery, malaria, tuberculosis, and pneumonia affect the population. Polio cases are high in insecure rural areas where healthcare workers cannot access patients. As a means of dealing with residual trauma from recent conflicts, many Afghans use opiates such as heroin and opium. Tobacco and marijuana use is also prevalent.

Thousands of Afghan civilians have been injured or maimed as a result of land mines or explosive remnants of war (ERWs). Some of these mines date back to the Soviet-Afghan War and the subsequent internal conflict between mujahideen (Islamic fighters) factions; the number of explosive devices increased considerably during the U.S.-led military campaign (which began in 2001). Land mines remain a risk in many areas and continue to cause considerable civilian injuries and deaths.