

Geography of Afghanistan



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Location: Afghanistan is located in Central Asia, north and west of Pakistan, east of Iran, and south of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. The narrow Wakhan Corridor extends from north-easternmost Afghanistan to meet with China.

Size: Afghanistan occupies approximately 647,500 square kilometers, slightly less than Texas.

Land Boundaries: Afghanistan has borders with the following countries: China, 76 kilometers; Iran, 936 kilometers; Pakistan, 2,430 kilometers; Tajikistan, 1,206 kilometers; Turkmenistan, 744 kilometers; and Uzbekistan, 137 kilometers.

Disputed Territory: Afghanistan has no boundary disputes; ongoing incursions, smuggling, and terrorist movement across the Pakistan border are addressed in periodic bilateral meetings.

Length of Coastline/Maritime Claims: Afghanistan is landlocked.

Topography: The terrain of Afghanistan is dominated by rugged mountain ranges, which generally run from the northeast to the southwest. Mountains occupy all but the north-central and southwestern regions of the country, which are dominated by plains. Nearly half the country has an elevation of 2,000 meters or more, and the highest peaks in the northeastern Hindu Kush range exceed 7,000 meters. Historically, mountain passes along the northeastern border with present-day Pakistan have been of great strategic importance. Significant parts of the southwestern plains region are desert.

Principal Rivers: The main rivers are the Amu Darya, 800 kilometers; the Harirud, 850 kilometers; the Helmand, 1,000 kilometers; and the Kabul, 460 kilometers. Afghanistan's chief tributaries to the Amu Darya, which forms much of the country's northern border, are the Koshk and the Qonduz.

Climate: Afghanistan's climate generally is of the arid or semi-arid steppe type, featuring cold winters and dry, hot summers. The mountains of the northeast have subarctic winter conditions. Farther south, monsoon effects moderate the climate near the Pakistan border and increase rainfall as far inland as central Afghanistan. The highest precipitation occurs in the Kabul region of the northeast. The highest temperatures and lowest precipitation are in the southwestern plains region, where summer temperatures reach 49° C. Low temperatures in the northeastern mountains range from -15° C in winter to 0° C in summer. The climate of the north-central Turkistan Plain is increasingly arid closest to the northern borders with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Natural Resources: Agricultural resources are primarily grazing land; fertile crop-growing land is concentrated in Kondo Province in the north and Helmand Province in the south. Afghanistan is known to have major deposits of chrome, coal, copper, iron, and salt, as well as lesser amounts of a wide variety of minerals including gold, silver, and uranium. Natural gas is the most abundant hydrocarbon resource. Substantial oil deposits are recognized but not yet quantified. Water for all purposes is in critically short supply.

Land Use: Some 12.1 percent of Afghanistan's land is classified as arable; however, in the early 2000s a four-year drought cut that figure in half. In 2007 only 0.2 percent of the total was planted to permanent crops.

Environmental Factors: Although little studied before recent times, the environment of Afghanistan is assumed to have been spared large-scale disturbances until the Soviet invasion of 1979. Since that time, however, numerous events have caused severe damage. Afghanistan, which has no appreciable bodies of water, suffers from a limited freshwater supply that makes potable water unavailable to more than half the population. In recent years, groundwater quality has deteriorated because of agricultural and industrial runoff, and water quantity has been diminished by large-scale land clearing and desertification. Because of insufficient water treatment, the incidence of water-borne diseases is very high. Widespread overgrazing, soil erosion, salinization, and waterlogging have reduced agricultural productivity. Although Afghanistan has little industry, particulate pollutants from the Aral Sea and industrial complexes in Iran, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan contaminate the atmosphere in northern Afghanistan. Chemical use and physical destruction in recent military conflicts have damaged the

environment, and landmines and unexploded shells are residual hazards endangering an estimated 4 million Afghans in 32 provinces. Northeastern Afghanistan is considered an earthquake hazard zone; in 1998 an earthquake along the Tajikistan border resulted in an estimated 4,000 fatalities.

Time Zone: Afghanistan is four and one-half hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time.

Population: In the early 2000s, population assessment has been difficult because many people have not had fixed residences. In 2008 the estimated population was 32.7 million. The population growth rate was 2.6 percent per year. The population is approximately 75 percent rural; in 2008 the six most populous cities accounted for less than 10 percent of the population. In 2006 net out-migration was 0.4 per 1,000 population. After heavy out-migration and internal displacement in the 1980s and 1990s, an estimated 2.5 million Afghans returned to Afghanistan in 2003–4 before the numbers began to decrease. The United Nations reported that in 2007 some 365,400 Afghans returned to their country, bringing the total of repatriations since 2002 to 4.1 million. In 2007 more than 2 million Afghans were living in Pakistan and 1.5 million in Iran. In 2007 both countries, the main recipients of Afghan refugees, began preparations for large-scale deportation. Tajikistan closed its border with Afghanistan in 2007. Meanwhile, in that year insecure conditions in Afghanistan noticeably decreased the rate of return. In the early 2000s, hundreds of thousands were internally displaced within Afghanistan, mainly from rural to urban areas, because of drought and instability. In the first quarter of 2008, an estimated 13,000 people fled their homes as conflicts occurred in previously safe regions.

Demography: In 2008 some 44.6 percent of the population was younger than 15 years of age, and 2.4 percent was older than 64. The estimated birthrate was 45.8 per 1,000 population, and the estimated death rate was 19.6 per 1,000 population. The infant mortality rate was 155 deaths per 1,000 live births. Life expectancy was 44.2 years for males and 44.4 years for females. The fertility rate was 6.6 children born per woman.

Ethnic Groups: The main ethnic groups are Pashtun, 42 percent; Tajik, 27 percent; Hazara, 9 percent; Uzbek, 9 percent; Aimak (a Persian-speaking nomadic group), 4 percent; Turkmen, 3 percent; and Baloch, 2 percent. The largest remaining nomadic group is the Kuchis, a Pashtun group whose population has dwindled to about 1.5

million since 1979. The Pashtuns are the major ethnic group in the south and the east, the Tajiks in the northeast. The predominant groups in north-central Afghanistan are the Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks.

Languages: More than 30 languages are spoken in Afghanistan. The official languages are Dari (Afghan Persian) and Pashtu. Dari is spoken by 50 percent of the population, and Pashtu is spoken as a first language by 35 percent. Turkic languages (primarily Turkmen and Uzbek) are spoken by 11 percent of the population. Of the languages spoken by smaller segments of the population, the most important are Balochi and Pashai. Many Afghans speak more than one language; Dari is the most common second language.

Religion: Virtually the entire population is Muslim. Between 80 and 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni and 15 to 19 percent, Shia. The minority Shia are economically disadvantaged and frequently subjected to discrimination. Small numbers of Hindus and Sikhs live in urban centers. A Jewish population that numbered 5,000 in 1948 had left Afghanistan entirely by 2000.

Education and Literacy: Despite substantial improvements during the reign of Mohammad Zahir Shah (ruled 1933–73), in 1979 some 90 percent of Afghanistan's population was illiterate. In 2006 an estimated 57 percent of men and 87 percent of women were illiterate, and the lack of skilled and educated workers was a major economic disadvantage.

Beginning with the Soviet invasion of 1979, successive wars virtually destroyed the education system. Most teachers fled the country during the Soviet occupation and the subsequent civil war. By 1996 only about 650 schools were functioning. In 1996 the Taliban regime banned education for females, and the madrassa (mosque school) became the main source of primary and secondary education. After the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, the interim government received substantial international aid to restore the education system, but for the next six years the Taliban attacked public schools wherever possible. In 2007 increased Taliban activity forced the closure of 35 percent of the schools in the southern provinces. The Taliban opened some fundamentalist schools in regions that they controlled. In 2004 and 2005, informal community education programs began in nine provinces. In 2008 about 9,500 schools reportedly were operating, at least some in every province. The Ministry of Education estimated that in 2006, 8 million children were in school, including nearly 3 million girls. Despite renewed emphasis on educating girls, in 2008 the ratio of girls to boys in secondary schools was one to three or four, as rural families continued the tradition of educating only males. Since the end of the dogmatic Taliban era in 2001, public school curricula have included religious subjects, but detailed instruction is left to religious teachers.

Higher education also has been problematic. When Kabul University reopened in 2002, some 24,000 students, male and female, enrolled. In the early 2000s, the rehabilitation of five other universities progressed very slowly. Although seven universities were operating in 2007, only a total of 22,700 students were active in higher education.

Health: Beginning in 1979, military conflict destroyed Afghanistan's health system. Most medical professionals left the country in the 1980s and 1990s, and all medical training programs ceased. In 2003 Afghanistan had 11 physicians and 18 nurses per 100,000 population, and the per capita health expenditure was US\$ 28. In 2004

Afghanistan had one medical facility for every 27,000 people, and some centers were responsible for as many as 300,000 people. In 2007 international organizations provided a large share of medical care. An estimated one-quarter of the population has no access to health care. Neonatal care is especially poor, and infant and child mortality rates are among the highest in the world. In 2005 the number of infant deaths within the first month after birth, 60 per 1,000 live births, was the second-highest rate in the world, and in rural areas, one in five children dies before reaching age five. The maternal death rate, 1,900 per 100,000 live births, also is one of the world's highest.

At the same time, the physical and psychological effects of war have substantially increased the need for medical care. Because of poor sanitation and insufficient potable water supply,

infectious and parasitic diseases such as malaria and diarrhea are very common. Malnutrition and poor nutrition also are pervasive. The drought of 1999–2002 exacerbated these conditions. An estimated 800,000 Afghans are disabled. Health authorities consider Afghanistan a high-risk country for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) because of the high incidence of intravenous drug use, unsafe blood transfusion procedures, large numbers of refugees, poor health facilities, and illiteracy. The comparative impact of those factors is unknown. In 2008 the Ministry of Health reported 435 cases nationwide, but it estimated that a total of 2,000 to 2,500 citizens were currently infected. In 2005 an estimated 1 million people were using narcotics, 200,000 of whom used opium. Despite large-scale international assistance, in 2004 the World Health Organization did not expect Afghanistan's health indicators to improve substantially for at least a decade.

Welfare: Largely because of protracted military conflict, in the early 2000s Afghanistan had the highest proportion of widows and orphans (respectively, 1 million and 1.6 million in 2005) in the world. Large numbers of disabled individuals and former members of regional militias also lack a means of support. The billions of dollars in aid that entered Afghanistan in the post-2001 era tended to bifurcate society as wealth was concentrated in a small elite. In 2006 the British Department for International Development estimated that 70 percent of Afghans were subsisting on less than US\$2 per day. The government has provided very little welfare protection. Most of the welfare activity in the country has been provided by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Afghan Health and Development Services, Afghan Women's Education Center, and Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan, and by United Nations organizations. NGOs also work with Afghan refugees in other countries, especially Pakistan.

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