

## Introduction

A gateway to India, impinging on the ancient Silk Road, which carried trade from the Mediterranean to China, the area of Afghanistan has been of great strategic importance. Therefore, it was often coveted by powerful neighbors. In the sixteenth century the Persian Safavid Empire in the west, the Turkic **Uzbek** state to the north, and the Moghul (Mughal) Empire of India were disputing control of the area. Soon after the founding of the state of Afghanistan in 1747, Russia and Britain left the country as a precarious buffer between the two empires. During the second half of the twentieth century it became an arena of conflict in the cold war between the **United States** and the Soviet Union. Finally, in the 1990s, the establishment of a radical **Islamist** regime in **Kabul** threatened to make the country the base of an Islamist world revolution. American intervention brought an end to the radical **Taliban** regime, but Afghanistan may remain an area of conflict which could threaten the peace of the world.

## LAND AND PEOPLE

### Geography

Afghanistan is a mountainous, landlocked state of about 245,000 square miles, which is approximately the area of Texas, and a population of about 15.5 million in the 1970s (estimate based on demographic research under the auspices of the Afghan Central Statistics Office).

The climate in Afghanistan varies in accordance with the particular geographic zone: subarctic conditions in the northeast and **Hindu Kush** Mountains (with peaks at 14,000 to 17,000 feet), a semiarid steppe climate in low-lying areas, and mild, moist weather in the southeast bordering Pakistan. The estimated annual rainfall is between 11 and 15

inches with great variations—more on the southeastern slopes of mountains exposed to the monsoon rains and much less in the southwestern deserts.

About 83 percent of the Wakhan-Pamir area lies at an altitude above 10,000 feet and another 17 percent at an altitude of between 6,000 and 10,000 feet. Therefore, snow covers the mountains and most passes are seasonally closed. The yak and Bactrian camel are utilized in the transportation of man and goods.

A similar climate exists in the Central Mountains, including most of central and eastern **Hazarajat** and the Hindu Kush Ranges extending from the Shibar Pass through the **Koh-i Baba** in the west, which is crossed by the **Salang** Tunnel at an altitude of about 11,000 feet. A limited amount of agriculture exists in the valleys, and nomads seasonally graze their livestock on the foothills.

The Eastern Mountains include four major regions: **Kabul, Kohistan/Panjshir**, the Ghorband, and **Nuristan**, the latter being the most inaccessible. Snow exists at altitudes above 10,000 feet. Temperatures reach lows of one degree Fahrenheit, and winter lasts from December until March. Summer temperatures depend on altitude. In the southwest, stony deserts extend to the Iranian border, and the **Registan**, “Land of Sand,” extends south of the **Helmand** River and eastward as far as Shorawak, forming a natural boundary with **Pakistan**. On the edges of the Registan, the desert gradually changes into a hilly landscape of sand hills thickly sprinkled with bushes and vegetation and grass after rains. **Baluch** and **Brahui** nomads seasonally graze their flock in this areas. The major agricultural areas are confined to the valleys watered by the **Amu Daria** and the northern plains, the **Hari Rud/Murghab** system in the northwest, the Helmand/**Arghandab** system, and the **Kabul River** system. The melting snow feeds the dry riverbeds in spring and provides much of the water for irrigation. About 12 percent of the land is arable, 46 percent are meadows and pastures, 3 percent are forests and woodland, and 39 percent are deserts and mountains.

## Religion

According to local tradition, **Balkh**, the “Mother of Cities,” in northern Afghanistan was founded by Balkh ibn Balakh ibn Saman ibn Salam ibn Ham ibn Nuh (Noah). Zoroastrian tradition holds that Balkh was the

birthplace of Zoroaster and Buddhism flourished before the advent of Islam. But since the 1890s, when the last remnant of non-Muslim communities was converted, the religion of **Islam** has prevailed in Afghanistan. The only measurable religious minorities today are small communities of Hindus and **Sikhs**, most of whom left during the past two decades of civil war.

Although there has never been a census, a rough estimate is that about 80–85 percent of the population adheres to the **Sunni** school of Islam, the rest are **Shi'a** of several denominations. Until recently, Islam was the criterion of nationality: to be an Afghan meant to be a Muslim. To convert to another religion is treason, an unforgivable sin. Islam is the ideology that holds the multiethnic state together.

Islam is a monotheistic religion which continues the prophetic Judeo-Christian tradition, but recognizes Muhammad as the last of the prophets. Both Sunnis and Shi'as accept the **Five Pillars of Islam**: the profession of faith, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and pilgrimage. They differ as to the legitimacy of leadership of the Islamic community (originally the Sunni caliphs and the Shi'ite imams), the sources of jurisprudence, as well as the authority of the clergy (**ulama**). For a description of the religious beliefs, see ISLAM.

### Population and Society

The Afghan population is heterogeneous, including numerous communities that speak various dialects or mutually unintelligible languages. The largest ethnic group is the **Pashtuns** who speak **Pashtu**, an Indo-Iranian language, and are located primarily in the south and east of Afghanistan. The next largest language group comprises the **Tajik**, **Farsiwan**, and **Hazara** who speak local dialects of **Dari** and dominate in the west, north, and center of the country. Finally, there are those speaking various Turkic dialects; they include the **Uzbek** and **Turkoman** and are located primarily in north-central Afghanistan. For other, smaller communities, see ETHNIC GROUPS.

Dari (a dialect of Persian) was until recently the language of the court, education, and bureaucracy, and the lingua franca of all language groups, but since the middle of the twentieth century, education in Pashtu became available in those areas that are largely Pashtun. Governments since the 1930s attempted to establish Pashtu as the national

language and required all students and government officials to study the language, but Dari has retained its dominant position. The Constitution of 1964 proclaimed Dari and Pashtu the official languages, and during the 1980s newspapers and various publications appeared also in other minority languages.

It should be emphasized that the ethnic communities are not necessarily monolithic blocs. The focal points of loyalty are the family, clan, or village; only the Pashtun of the frontier are still organized in more or less autonomous tribes. In spite of occasional frictions, no secessionist aspirations seem to exist, and all communities accept Afghanistan as their home.

Demographically, no exact data exist, because no nationwide census has been conducted. Two decades of war have caused large population movements. There has been an increase in urbanization as internal refugees sought the safety of major cities. Some five million refugees migrated to Iran and Pakistan and thousands fled to Europe and America. The population of Kabul at times exceeded two million and may still amount to about one and a half million.

Economically, Afghanistan is largely dependent on subsistence agriculture. Major agricultural exports include fresh and dried fruit; other items are qaraqul skins, carpets, and kelims. The major trading partners are the Soviet Union, India, and Pakistan. Natural gas, exported to the Soviet Union, was an important stimulant in trade with the northern neighbor. More than two decades of war have interrupted traditional trade patterns and made **opium** one of the major cash crops of the country. Attempts at creating an outlet for natural gas and oil from the newly independent Central Asian states by constructing pipelines through western Afghanistan have so far failed because of the ongoing armed conflict. Foreign aid during the second part of the twentieth century made possible the development of an economic infrastructure. But much has been destroyed and the new Afghan government is depending on foreign aid to rebuild the country.

## HISTORY

Afghanistan, the “Land of the Afghans,” began as a political entity in 1747 when **Ahmad Shah** (r. 1747–1773) was crowned king of a tribal confederation; it is an ancient land with a glorious history of kingdoms

dating back some 3,500 years. As part of the nation-building process, Afghan historians in the twentieth century popularized the idea of an organic link existing between modern Afghanistan and its ancient roots. They see a continuum from **Ariana** (1500 B.C.) of the Indo-Iranians, centered around Balkh, city of Zoroaster, in northern Afghanistan to the Buddhist kingdom of the **Kushanids** (about 50–250 A.D.) with its capital in Peshawar and Bagram. Intermittently, Afghanistan was peripheral to empires as a satrapy of the Achaemenid Empire in the sixth century B.C., of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C., and the Maurian kingdom of **Asoka** a century later.

Afghanistan's Islamic roots began with the Muslim Arab invasion in the seventh century A.D., but it was not until the tenth century that Islam was firmly established and not until the end of the nineteenth century that the last vestiges of pre-Islamic communities disappeared. The first indigenous Islamic state was the **Ghaznawid** Empire (977–1186), named after its capital **Ghazni**, a town in eastern Afghanistan. It was destroyed by the **Ghorids** (1150–1217) whose capital was **Ghor**, a town in central Afghanistan. The domains of both empires included large portions of northern India. The Mongols wreaked destruction in the thirteenth century, as did **Timur-i Lang**, almost two centuries later. Timur's descendants rebuilt **Herat** and made it a great cultural center. By the sixteenth century Afghanistan was again peripheral to powerful neighbors.

Almost simultaneously three empires emerged in the early sixteenth century: the Safavid rulers of Iran (1501–1786) who controlled portions of western Afghanistan; the Moghul rulers of India (1526–1858) who made Kabul their capital in 1504, until **Babur** (q.v., 1526–1530) and his successors established themselves in Delhi and Agra; and the Shaibanid Uzbeks (1500–1598) who founded a kingdom which extended from the plains north of the **Hindu Kush** far into Transoxania.

Modern Afghanistan was born as a result of revolt against foreign occupation. **Mir Wais**, founder of the short-lived **Hotaki** dynasty (1709–1738), rose in rebellion against Gorgin Khan, the Safavid governor of **Kandahar**; he defeated the avenging Safavid armies and, encouraged by his success, raided far into Iran. The **Abdali** (later **Durrani**) tribes liberated Herat, and Afghan tribes flocked to the banner of Mahmud (1716–1725), son of Mir Wais, who besieged Isfahan and, in the battle of **Gulnabad** in 1722, ended the rule of the Safavid kings. The Hotaki **Ghilzais** were soldiers, not empire builders. They could not hold

on to their conquests, and **Nadir Shah Afshar** (r. 1736–1747) reunited Iran under his short-lived dynasty, which included Afghanistan and northern India.

Ahmad Shah commanded an Afghan contingent of Nadir Shah's army and, at the sudden death of the latter, was able to intercept a convoy of booty destined for Iran. This gave him the means to augment his forces and consolidate his power. Following the example of previous guardians of the "gateway to India," he led nine invasions into the Indian subcontinent and made himself the undisputed ruler of an empire to which Afghan historians refer as the "historical" Afghanistan. The boundaries of this state were the **Amu Daria** in the north, the Indus river in the east, the Indian Ocean in the south, and the present Iranian provinces of **Khorasan** and Sistan in the west. Ahmad Shah ruled a heterogeneous population which also included, in addition to the dominant Pashtun element forming the core of his armies, a largely sedentary population of Dari/Farsi speakers, Turkic and Baluch minorities, and a multitude of ethnic and sectarian groups.

In 1600 the British **East India Company** obtained a charter for exploration and commerce in Bengal, India, and a century and a half later, the Company was the de facto ruler of Bengal. Its Board of Control appointed a governor-general as executive who conducted the government for the Company until 1858, when the crown ended the charter and appointed a viceroy, subject to the control of the London government. At the same time, Britain continued its territorial conquests and started to worry about how to protect its new acquisitions from Afghan attacks, or Russian expansionism, which had reached Persia's borders in the Caucasus.

The Afghan heartland is a mountain fastness, surrounded by deserts in the north, west, and south, with cultivation supported by five major river systems, dependent on melting snow from the mountains for irrigation. Subsistence agriculture, small-scale mining, and a handicraft industry for domestic consumption did not provide sufficient surplus wealth to support a lavish court. The ruling Durrani and allied tribes depended on a system of military feudalism which allocated agricultural lands to the chiefs in exchange for military service, corresponding to the size of their fiefs (*tiyul*). An alternative was territorial conquest. The Afghans saw it as their manifest destiny to rule the fertile Panjab plains if not all of northern India.

A policy of conquest had definite advantages: it brought prosperity to the Pashtun tribes and kept them united. Ahmad Shah was not an ab-

solute ruler; he was a *primus inter pares* who had to contend with the ambitions of the khans, the chiefs of the major tribes. It was for this reason that he also recruited a force of non-Pashtun **Qizilbash** soldiers. When **Timur**, one of Ahmad Shah's six sons, succeeded to the Afghan throne in 1773, he transferred the capital from Kandahar to Kabul, where he was more secure from the intrigues of the Kandahar chiefs. Described as "more a scholar than a soldier," Timur Shah faced revolt in the periphery of the empire. **Shah Zaman**, one of Timur's 23 sons, ascended the throne in 1793, amid internecine warfare which led to the eventual demise of the Sadozai (see DURRANI DYNASTY) dynasty. Britain extended her control in India, and the emergence of the Sikh Empire of **Ranjit Singh** (1780–1839) in the Panjab definitely ended Afghan aspirations of eastward expansion.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan became directly involved in European empire politics. In addition to Russia and Britain, France emerged as a contender in the "Great Game" for imperial conquest. The first contact between a British envoy, **Mountstuart Elphinstone**, and an Afghan ruler (**Shah Shuja**, r. 1803–1810 and 1839–1842) took place at Peshawar in February 1809 and led to an alliance against a Franco-Persian invasion which, however, never materialized. The next, more fateful encounter, was the **First Anglo-Afghan War** (1839–1842).

When **Dost Muhammad** (r. 1826–1838 and 1842–1863), first of the **Barakzai** amirs, ascended the Kabul throne in 1826, Persia occupied **Khorasan** with Russian support and besieged Herat, while Ranjit Singh conquered Multan, Kashmir, Derajat, and Peshawar. Fearing an Afghan alliance with Russia, Lord **Auckland**, governor-general of India, decided to restore Shah Shuja to the Afghan throne. The British invasion, though initially successful, resulted in a disastrous defeat in the First Anglo-Afghan War. The British government refrained for almost 40 years from conducting a "forward" policy at its northwestern frontier. However, Russian advances in Central Asia continued, and voices in London and Delhi demanded a new policy and consolidation of a "scientific" frontier for the defense of India. In 1877 the Queen of England was proclaimed empress of India and a year later, British-Indian armies again invaded Afghanistan. **Amir Shir Ali** (r. 1863–1866 and 1868–1879), who had negotiated with a Russian envoy at Kabul, was forced to seek refuge in northern Afghanistan where he died shortly afterwards. He was succeeded by his

son **Muhammad Yaqub** who signed the Treaty of **Gandomak** (1879) and permitted a permanent British mission to be established in Kabul. Insurrection and the massacre of the British envoy and his staff led to the demise of Yaqub Khan and recognition in 1880 of **Abdul Rahman Khan** as the next Afghan ruler.

With Amir **Abdul Rahman** (r. 1880–1901), the traditional system of rule came to an end. The “Iron Amir” no longer appointed princes as governors of major provinces, a practice which had led to much strife in the past. He ended the local autonomy of Uzbek khans in the north, Hazaras in the center, and the **Kafirs** in the east of Afghanistan. Abdul Rahman reconquered the country and expelled or killed any of the notables who could pose a threat to his power. He claimed both the highest secular and spiritual powers and limited the influence of the ulama (religious establishment) and the tribes. His reign marked the beginning of centralized rule and the bureaucratization of the government. His regular army gradually replaced feudal and irregular levies, ending the system of military feudalism. An alliance with Britain protected Afghanistan from unprovoked Russian aggression and provided the funds and weapons to eliminate all domestic challenges to his power. In exchange, the Afghan ruler agreed to conduct his relations with neighboring states through the medium of the British government. Abdul Rahman formulated a foreign policy which served Afghanistan well, until King **Amanullah** (r. 1919–1929) in the **Third Anglo-Afghan War** (1919) ended the country’s dependence on Britain. A window to the West, which gradually had begun to open when Amir **Habibullah** (1901–1919) received a German mission during World War I, was thrown wide open under King Amanullah. Afghanistan established diplomatic relations with major European and Asian countries.

A contemporary of Kemal Ataturk of Turkey and Reza Shah of Iran, Amanullah ushered in Western reforms and first introduced the institutions of constitutional government. A short period of reaction under **Habibullah Kalakani** (January–October 1929) did not end the process of modernization, most visible in the expansion of education during the reigns of **Muhammad Nadir Shah** (r. 1929–1933) and his son **Zahir Shah** (r. 1933–1973). The fact that the experiment with democracy in the 1960s ended in failure, war, and foreign intervention should not be surprising. The socioeconomic conditions which favor a trend to a stable, if not democratic, government still did not exist. **Muhammad Daud** felt