

Afghanistan in Focus

From Operation World, 2001

A Brief Overview and History

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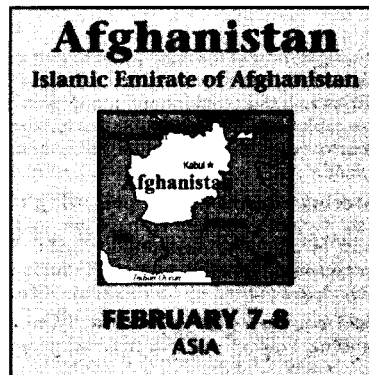
The history of Afghanistan is a long and brutal one: more brutal than the rugged and desolate terrain that characterizes this land. Except for brief periods of peace, strength, and conquest, its history has been one of internal strife and external invasion. When not fighting with their neighbors over territory, they were either being invaded by the Mongols, the British or the Soviet Union, or they were engaged in almost ceaseless civil, ethnic and political conflict within the country. This has left little time and energy for building a politically progressive and economically prosperous country. It is now one of the poorest countries on earth.

Islam came to Afghanistan in 652AD as a result of Arab-Muslim conquests. The kingdoms in Kabul battled for almost a hundred years against these conquerors. However, the country became a center of Islamic power and civilization in the 10th and 11th centuries. In 1221 Ghengis Khan and the Mongols brutally invaded Afghanistan, burning most of the Afghan cities and destroying the irrigation system resulting in the permanent desertification of much fertile land. The Mongols controlled Afghanistan for 100 years. The first united Afghan state was established by Ahmad Shah Durani in 1747. During his rule, Afghanistan became the greatest Muslim empire of its time with its domain stretching from Central Asia to Delhi and from Kashmir to the Arabian Sea.

In 1838 the British invaded the country with the help of an ex-king in the first of three Anglo-Afghan wars. The final war in 1919 resulted in full Afghan independence

from Britain.

In 1933, Zahir Shah inherited the throne upon the assassination of his father. The U.S. formally recognized Afghanistan in 1934. A period of relative stability and economic and political progress ensued with a growing



GEOGRAPHY
Area 652,225 sq.km. Dry and mountainous, but with fertile valleys. This strategic land has been fought over by rival foreign empires for nearly three thousand years.

Population	Ann.Gr.	Density
2000 22,720,000	+2.93%	35 per sq. km.
2010 32,902,000	+2.58%	50 per sq. km.
2025 44,934,000	+1.95%	69 per sq. km.

No census or careful ethnic survey has ever been made. Figures are all estimates. Afghan refugees in 2000 numbered 1.4 million in Iran, 2.2 to 3 million in Pakistan and smaller numbers across the world after peaking in the 1990s at 6.5 million.

Capital Kabul 2,700,000. The civil war extensively damaged the capital. Other cities: Kandahar 420,000; Mazar-e-Sharif 270,000. Urbanites 22%.

PEOPLES
70 peoples.
Indo-Iranian 86.8%. Largest: Pashtun (Pathan) 9.7mill.; Tajik 4m; Hazara/Almaq (of Turkic origin) 1.8m; Other Persian-speaking 770,000; Baluch 260,000; Nuristani peoples(11) 250,000.
Turkic-speaking 10.7%. 10 peoples. Uzbek 1.8m; Turkmen 520,000.
Other 2.5%. Brahui 240,000; Pashai 160,000.
Literacy 10-31% (much lower for women).
Official languages Pashto (used by 50% of population), Dari (Afghan Persian, 35%). All languages 50. Languages with Scriptures 2NT 3por.

ECONOMY
Shattered by 22 years of war. The countryside was bombed and mined; half the housing, most of the complex irrigation systems and a high proportion of the livestock were destroyed. The most lucrative agricultural crop is now opium (Afghanistan is the world's largest producer) which has paid for weapons for the warring factions. Recovery has been slowed by the radical extremes of the Taliban government and widespread environmental and structural damage inflicted on this tragic land. HDI n.a. Public debt 95% of GNP. Income/person \$250 (0.8% of USA).

POLITICS
The monarchy was overthrown in 1973. Republican government ended in a Marxist coup in 1978. Then followed an invasion by the USSR. Ten years of war ensued culminating in the humiliating withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1988-89. Civil war between ethnic and religious factions has continued ever since with enormous damage and casualties. The extreme Islamist (mainly) Pashtun Taliban gained control of over 90% of the country by 2001. UN sanctions in 2001 further isolated the country.

RELIGION
The Taliban take-over of the country has imposed the strictest interpretation of Islam in the world today. The results have been devastating for the economy and for the lot of women in society. All Afghans must comply with the strict codes imposed on dress, beards, education and observance of *shari'a* law. What little religious freedom existed has been terminated.

Religions	Population %	Adherents	Ann.Gr.
Muslim	97.89	22,241,015	+2.9
Parsee	1.50	340,806	+2.9
Hindu	0.35	79,521	+0.2
Traditional ethnic	0.10	22,720	+2.9
Baha'i	0.10	22,720	n.a.
Christian	0.02	3,000	n.a.
Sikh	0.02	4,544	+2.9
non-Religious	0.01	2,272	+2.9

Non-Muslim figures may be now much lower than these stated. No Christian churches are permitted. The number of Afghan Christians is estimated to be 1,000 to 3,000. Some Christian expatriate workers have been permitted to serve in relief and social uplift programmes.

• Challenges for Prayer

1 The largely Pashtun Taliban swept to power with Pakistani military support, U.S. arms and Saudi money. Traditional and rural in outlook and using Islam to legitimate their authority, they have imposed a measure of stability after 22 years of war. A narrow interpretation of *shari'a* law has outlawed playing games, use of cassette tapes, videos and TV (and much more) and has tyrannized the Shi'a Muslims, women and anyone deviating from the Taliban's interpretation of the law. In 2001 the death penalty was imposed for anyone converting from Islam or attempting to convert anyone from Islam. Pray that the

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role for women in government and society. The king changed Afghanistan to a constitutional monarchy in 1964 with freedom of the press and permission for political parties. With Soviet help, communist insurgents used these new freedoms to undermine the fragile new democracy.

In July 1973, the king, Zahir Shah, was overthrown by Prince Daoud Khan, his cousin, in a Russian-backed coup while the king was out of the country. Displeased with Daoud's independence, the Soviets overthrew Daoud in 1978 and instituted the first Marxist government in Afghanistan. This was followed by an invasion of Soviet troops in 1979. After a 10-year war with the Mujahadeen, a loose alliance of Islamic rebel groups supported by the U.S., the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan and the U.S. withdrew its support of the Mujahadeen. This led to resentment toward the U.S. for the "abandonment" of the Afghan people and opened the door for more radical elements supported by Pakistan to take over. The Soviet's "puppet" government was overthrown in 1992 by the Mujahadeen and an Islamic state was established. But soon the various factions of the Mujahadeen turned their guns on each other. Bitter factional fighting killed over 50,000 people in just the capital of Kabul.

In 1994 the previously unknown Taliban militias were born and advanced rapidly against the government. With the support of Pakistan, the Taliban captured the capital, Kabul, in Sept. 1996. Persecution of women and harsh religious restrictions were imposed. In October 1996 various opposition groups from the pre-Taliban government came together to form the Northern Alliance to oppose Taliban rule.

On September 10, 2001, the day before the terrorist attacks on the U.S., Ahmad Shah Masood, leader of the Northern Alliance resisting Taliban rule, was assassinated by radicals posing as journalists.

On October 7 the U.S. launched air strikes against the Taliban regime and the terrorist camps of Osama bin Laden. With the help of U.S. air support the Northern

A unprecedented openness to the gospel created by these sufferings may ultimately lead to a great harvest.

2 Two decades of unremitting war have brought most of the population to ruin and destitution. An estimated 1 million lost their lives, 2 million were maimed and 4 million children orphaned. The result is ecological disaster, a shattered infrastructure, over 12 million uncleared anti-personnel mines and the capital in ruins. Pray for peace, reconstruction, an awakening to moderation and tolerance and a realization that Marxism and Islam cannot provide the solutions to heal their land.

3 Afghanistan has become an open, festering wound that is poisoning the world. Though most Taliban are nationalists, violent pan-Islamists have also joined the movement with the aim of exporting Islamist revolution to surrounding lands. The opium harvest is now the world's largest with production the equivalent of \$35 billion a year. Pray for a just, fair and honourable government to be raised up for this tragic land.

4 Afghanistan is one of the least reached countries in the world. There are 48,000 mosques but not a single church building. Pray for the 70 unreached peoples of this land, especially:

- a) **Pashtun.** Approximately half the Afghan population, and politically dominant, the Pashtuns on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border comprise what has been called the largest Muslim tribal society in the world — approximately 27 million people in over 30 major sub-tribes. There are few Christians among them, though urban, educated Pashtuns in exile have shown responsiveness. Pray that multitudes might be released from the strongholds of Islam, fear, prejudice and pride in pashtunwali (their tribal code of honour).
- b) **Uzbek and Turkmen** of the north have shown some responsiveness as refugees in other lands. Their whole way of life is under threat from the Taliban regime.
- c) **Tajik** in the north-east. They are among the last people to resist the Taliban. Pray for their spiritual freedom.
- d) **The Hazara,** Shi'a Muslims of Mongol descent, have been severely persecuted and even massacred by the Sunni Taliban. More responsive to the gospel in recent years.
- e) **The Kuchi nomads** in central and western regions who numbered 2.5m before the war destroyed their lifestyle. Most are Pashto- or Persian-speaking. Many fled to Pakistan.
- f) **The Aimaq** of the west and the **Baluch** and **Brahui** of the south.
- g) **The Nuristani tribes** in the mountains north and east of Kabul. They speak a number of mutually unintelligible languages. The major peoples are the Waigeli 40,000; Kati 100,000; Ashkun 10,000. They were forcibly converted to Islam a century ago. Some parts of Nuristan were much influenced in the 1990s by Wahhabism, a strict Islamic sect, very hostile to anything Christian.
- h) **The Sikh, Hindu and Parsee minorities** who are mainly traders.

5 Though there is no visible church in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan believers is increasing in urban and some remote rural areas. Because of fear and suspicion, many believers find it difficult to meet in groups. Some find help and encouragement through Christian radio programmes in the main languages of Afghanistan. The Taliban religious police are active in seeking out 'converts' who are considered apostates. Pray for their protection, consistency of faith and clarity of witness whenever opportunity arises. Pray also that the small fellowships (many are family groups) of Afghan Christians that have come into being in South Asia, Europe and North America may become bold witnesses for Christ.

6 Women in the cities have been severely repressed by the Taliban regime. They have been banished from public life, forbidden employment, restricted to the home, denied education (girls) and health services and suffer at the hands of men, with no recourse to any justice. One in four women are widows, and many are destitute. Depression and suicide are commonplace. Pray for basic human rights to be restored to women.

7 Christian aid ministries. Since 1966 a number of Christian relief and development agencies have ministered to the blind, maimed, sick, deprived, illiterate and needy in the name and Spirit of the Lord Jesus. Pray for courage in the face of severe restrictions or constant harassment and that their lives might commend the gospel. Pray that professionals may respond to the many needs of these Christian NGOs.

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Alliance then moved quickly to control the capital, Kabul, and the majority of the country.

The U.S., U.N. and other countries in the region are now working with various Afghan opposition groups, including the former king, Zahir Shah, to form a new broad-based, ethnically-diverse government for Afghanistan and to end years of factional fighting. 🌐