

## Part I: Afghanistan's People and History

For most of us, it is difficult to imagine what Afghanistan is like for the people who live there. Yet, as debates about Afghanistan's future continue, some fundamental questions deserve exploration. What is life like in Afghanistan? What is society like? How does history affect events in Afghanistan today? Part I of the reading provides a brief overview of the people and history of Afghanistan.

### *What is life like in rural areas of Afghanistan?*

Afghanistan's population today is about thirty million people. More than 75 percent live in rural areas, most in small villages. Life expectancy is low, around forty-five years. Most rural Afghans are either subsistence farmers or pastoralists, which means they graze small herds of animals.

Life in rural Afghanistan is difficult for many people. Family members rise before dawn to begin working. Men typically labor on small, family-owned plots to sow and harvest wheat, barley, rice, fruit, or nuts, most of which are saved for family consumption. Women often manage the household, collect water and firewood, and take care of children. Electricity is extremely rare as is mechanical farm equipment. Except in the mountain regions, most rural villages depend on irrigation and are located near water sources. Farmers without irrigation depend on rainfall to water their crops.

Life for pastoralists also tends to be difficult. Pastoralists are nomadic, which means they migrate according to the season. By some estimates more than one million nomadic pastoralists live in Afghanistan today. They raise sheep and camels and move from pasture



Eric Kanalteir/UNAMA.

A farmer gathers wheat in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, August 11, 2009.





U.S. Army Staff Sgt. Russell Lee Kilka.

A bazaar in Kabul, Afghanistan, February 2009.

to pasture. Although the term nomad conveys the idea of wandering aimlessly, in fact these groups have set patterns of movement and play an important role in the economies of towns and cities. They sell meat, butter, cheese, and animal skins in city markets, and purchase grains and other goods from farmers and manufacturers.

Close social and economic connections between people are important in rural Afghanistan. Families, neighbors, and local communities depend on each other for survival. For example, communities maintain village irrigation systems and repair them after floods. These close ties have helped Afghans to weather the storms of political upheaval and invasion throughout their country's history.

***What is life like in towns and cities in Afghanistan?***

Today, life in rural Afghanistan is undergoing rapid change, particularly as many Afghans are migrating to Afghanistan's cities.

Currently, about 23 percent of Afghanistan's population lives in cities, but this number has been rising rapidly in the last decade. Life in cities in Afghanistan is less physically demanding than it is in the countryside. Education levels are higher, there are wide variations in levels of wealth, and a wide range of kinds of work.

The relationships between towns and cities, rural villages, and nomadic groups are close knit. Each depends on the others to procure the goods they need. For example, town and city dwellers depend on grain and agricultural products produced in the countryside. People in rural areas depend on the towns and cities for manufactured goods. All come together on "bazaar days" in towns, when goods are bought and sold at the markets. Afghanistan's cities are connected to neighboring countries and the global economy through trade.

## The Regions of Afghanistan

The geography of Afghanistan plays an important role in the country's history and culture. There are two massive mountain ranges called the Paropamisus and Hindu Kush that dominate the center of Afghanistan. The mountain ranges' snowmelts are a source of water for rivers and irrigated agriculture throughout much of Afghanistan. None of the rivers have enough water year-round to transport cargo or connect to the sea.

Afghanistan is a land-locked country. The rugged terrain and the presence of few roads makes travel through the region difficult. The dramatic changes in altitude mean that there are wide variations in climate. Farmers in different regions can produce a variety of fruits, nuts, and other crops.

The mountain ranges divide Afghanistan into four regions, each with a main city and distinct characteristics. Each of the four regions have economic and cultural connections to bordering countries. In spite of the ruggedness of the terrain, over the centuries trade routes have gone through the mountains to connect countries and regions beyond Afghanistan.

**Herat:** In western Afghanistan the city of Herat lies close to the Iranian border. An ancient city, it may have once had a population as large as one million before it was annihilated by invading Mongols in the twelfth century. It was once part of the Persian Empire, and most residents speak Dari, a dialect of Persian (the language spoken in Iran today).

**Qandahar:** The city of Qandahar has been at the center of politics and economics in southern Afghanistan for over five centuries. Large portions of southern Afghanistan are desert and as a consequence the population is relatively small for such a large region. The land around Qandahar itself is very productive agriculturally, producing cotton and varieties of fruit. Today, it also is where most of Afghanistan's opium poppies are grown, essential for the production of the illegal drug heroin.

Historically, Qandahar was a center of trade with India and the site of struggle between the Indian and Persian Empires. Qandahar is also the site of the founding of modern Afghanistan. There, in 1747, Ahmad Shah Durrani became the leader of a dynasty (a succession of family kings) that ruled Afghanistan until 1978. His successors moved the capital to the city of Kabul. Pashtuns make up the majority of Qandahar's population and speak the Pashto language. The Pashtuns are Afghanistan's largest ethnic group and have played a central role in Afghanistan's government for more than 250 years.

**Mazar-i-Sharif:** Mazar-i-Sharif is a city in northern Afghanistan. Because it is north of the Hindu Kush mountain range it was not influenced by Iran or India. Instead, it interacted more closely with the Turkish-speaking empires of Central Asia. Over thousands of years, countless Turkish speakers migrated to the region and assimilated with the Persian speakers who were already there. Today the region's inhabitants are ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks and who speak Dari and Uzbek. It is the site of a major Islamic shrine and is a center of pilgrimage for Muslims.

**Kabul:** Kabul is the largest city in all of Afghanistan and is the capital of the country. For thousands of years Kabul has connected the passes through Afghanistan's mountains with trade routes through India. Eastern Afghanistan is the most densely populated region of the country. Four to six million people live in the city of Kabul. This region is the most ethnically diverse region of the country. Pashtuns, Tajiks, and Hazaras are the largest groups in the region.

The geographic divisions of Afghanistan have always contributed to how the country is ruled. The central government in Kabul has had less control over remote regions. The different regions have often been dominated by different ethnic groups, and within ethnic groups by different tribes and clans (extended families).

## Afghanistan and its Neighbors

