Afghanistan

Country Overview

INTRODUCTION Afghanistan, officially known as the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan since 2004, is a mountainous, landlocked country that lies in the heart of the Eurasian landmass. It is bordered by Iran to the west, Turkmenistan to the northwest, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the north, China to the northeast, and Pakistan to the east and south. It has two official languages, Afghan Persian, also called Dari (50 percent), and Pashto, also called Afghan or Pathan (35 percent), as well as Uzbek and Turkmen (11 percent), and 30 minor languages (4 percent). Afghanistan’s linguistic diversity reflects its location at the crossroads of trade routes crisscrossing Eurasia.

Afghanistan is the probable homeland of Zoroastrianism, the ancient Persian religion founded by the prophet Zoroaster (c. 628–c. 551 BCE), who is thought to have lived and died in Balkh (in northern Afghanistan). Buddhism was first introduced to Afghanistan from India during the third century BCE; in fact, the Buddha’s first two lay disciples, Trapusa and Bahalika, were from Balkh and were the vessels by which the new faith entered the country. Buddhism reached its apogee in Afghanistan during the first and second centuries CE, after which it spread to China and Southeast Asia. Arab invaders brought Islam to Herat and Zaranj (in western Afghanistan) in 642 and began spreading eastward, fully conquering the country in the 11th century. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, Afghanistan became an important center for the development of Sufi Islam. The country had an arduous journey toward sovereignty in the 19th century, serving as the main chess board in the legendary “Great Game” played between the British and Russian Empires. It finally gained full sovereignty in 1919, which lasted until 1992, when factional fighting plunged the country into a protracted civil war that destroyed its state apparatus. The chaos of the civil war enabled the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, to wrest control of the country beginning in 1994. Nation-building resumed in 2001 after the defeat of the Taliban by an international invasion spearheaded by the United States and the indigenous Northern Alliance. Afghanistan’s political future remained uncertain as the United States and its international allies prepared to leave the country in 2014.

Today nearly all (99.7 percent) of the country’s inhabitants identify themselves as Muslim. According to estimates, approximately 80 percent identify as Sunnis, mostly of the Hanafi school. Meanwhile, a significant but difficult to calculate number of Afghan
Sunnis adhere to Sufism. Afghan Sufism, like Sufism elsewhere, emphasizes interiority and the idea that the goal of human existence is union with the divine. The remaining 19 percent of the population are Shia Muslims, who ultimately differ from Sunnis because of their belief in a divinely appointed leadership, or imamate. Afghan Shiism largely belongs to the largest branch of Shia Islam, the Twelvers. Since the 1980s, Afghan Sunnism has been heavily influenced by radicalized and puritanical precepts emerging out of extremist madrassas (religious schools) in Pakistan. The major fruit of this change has been the Taliban, a militant movement seeking to establish a theocracy in Afghanistan. (The Afghan Taliban should not be confused with the Pakistani Taliban, although they are connected.)

**RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE** Although there were some long-standing conflicts between Afghanistan’s Sunni majority and religious minorities such as the Shia Hazaras, for the most part, before the late 20th century, Afghans abided by a “live and let live”-style of interreligious tolerance. This broke down when the United States began funding and arming an insurgency against the Soviet military intervention of the 1980s. There is a debate as to how much of the American support (intended for moderate, nationalist, and indigenous Islamists) ended up in the coffers of radical, internationalist, and often foreign Islamists—possibly including Osama bin Laden (1957–2011). It seems, however, that the lion’s share (as much as 600 million USD, according to journalist Peter Bergen) went to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (b. 1947), whose ideology is similar to Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and Pakistan’s Jamaat-e Islami in that it calls for the creation of an Islamic state with distinctly militaristic characteristics. Hekmatyar was accused of murdering Western aid workers and journalists, as well as killing other Afghans. In the civil war between 1992 and 1996, Hekmatyar shelled Kabul, deliberately targeting the civilian population; at the time, he told a New York Times journalist that Afghanistan “already had one and a half million martyrs. We are ready to offer as many to establish a true Islamic Republic.”

The rule of the Taliban, which arose from this anarchy, was marked by a historically unprecedented period of religious persecution, including the mass murder of religious and ethnic minorities, human-rights abuses, and the ill treatment of women. Incarcerations, the severing of limbs, public beatings, and public executions by stoning in sports stadiums became routine measures by which the Taliban’s Ministry of Fostering Virtue and Suppressing Vice enforced its radical interpretation of the Koran (Quran) and Islamic law (which some argue was a radicalized and hybridized version of traditional Pashtun tribal law).

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the new democratic government announced that it would pursue a policy of religious tolerance and provisionally re-adopted the constitution of 1964 as the legal basis for religious freedom until a new constitution could be drafted. Islamic ultraconservatives within the government, however, strongly opposed this move, and in 2004 the country adopted a new constitution that announced “an Islamic Republic, independent, unitary, and indivisible state.” The preamble of the new constitution stipulates that “followers of other faiths shall be free within the bounds of law in the exercise and performance of their religious rights,” but warns, “No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam in Afghanistan.” Nevertheless, the preamble acknowledges, “the previous injustices, miseries and innumerable disasters which have befallen our country” and commits the new Afghan state to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### Major Religion

**SUNNI ISLAM**

**DATE OF ORIGIN** 650 CE  
**NUMBER OF FOLLOWERS** 24.9 million

**HISTORY** Current historiography of Afghan Islam tends to be filtered through the lens of the country’s record of war since the mid-19th century. Afghanistan is frequently ascribed the dubious sobriquet “The Graveyard of Empires,” the connotations of which are dually religious and geopolitical.

In fact, conflict, destruction, and regression, although certainly the salient aspects of Afghanistan today, are not, from the historian’s perspective, the defining characteristics of Afghan Islam. Rather, prior to the upheavals wrought since the 1980s, Islam in Afghanistan was characterized by its continuities with the past and, moreover, by its ability to syncretize and assimilate this past, including successfully rendering the pre- and non-Islamic elements as Islamic by expanding the religion’s
conceptual and ritualistic repertoire. Afghan Islam was especially skilled at making the past relevant to the present, although it could also frequently be stubborn and resistant to change. Of course, there was violence and upheaval, but Afghan Islam’s roots in the country’s pre-Islamic past proved to be deep, stable, and resilient.

In the Classical era, Afghanistan was often known as Ariana (a Greek word derived from the Sanskrit word Ārya, meaning “Iranian”). During this time, Zoroastrianism and then Buddhism were established in the region. The Buddhist era was a particularly interesting phase in the country’s spiritual history, as Afghanistan experienced the rise of kingdoms constituted by the commingling of ancient Indian and ancient Greek ethnic populations, the latter having been left behind by Alexander the Great’s (356–323 BCE) failed march to India in the fourth century BCE. This contact led to the fusion of these two civilizations’ religious ideas. The resultant “Greco-Buddhism” produced many artistic and intellectual innovations that eventually re-migrated eastward, informing the Mahayana tradition, today one of the two main branches of Buddhism.

In the Medieval era, after the Islamic conquest of Afghanistan (642–870), the bulk of its present territory, as well as large chunks of modern-day Iran, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, became known as Khurasan (from the Persian word khāvār-zamīn, meaning “where the sun rises” or “the eastern land,” i.e., from the perspective of the capital in Baghdad). It was during this period that Islam gained dominance in Afghanistan, sometimes dramatically by armed conflict, but for the most part gradually through reasoned argument, economic opportunity, and the careful adoption and adaptation of local concepts and rituals.

Khurasan served as both an enormous social-political laboratory for ideological-legal innovations and an intellectual factory producing many of Islam’s most important philosophers. At the time, the Muslim community was struggling to administer its religiously diverse political territory, as well as trying to manage the impact of ancient Greek philosophical ideas that had been translated into Arabic. Afghanistan’s solution to this was the development of the Hanafi madhab (a madhab is a doctrinal system for jurisprudence and daily life). Hanafism is named for its founder, Nu’man ibn Thabit ibn Zuta ibn Marzuban, also known as Imam Abu Hanifah (699–767). The son of a trader from Kabul, Abu Hanifah was a Persian born in the Iraqi city of Kufa. In brief, his madhab emphasizes the use of analogical reasoning to find parallels between present conditions and the original Muslim community, which is supposed to serve as the model of Islamic law. Hanafi jurists made use of the insights and philosophies of non-Islamic

A Muslim cleric visits the shrine of Hazrati-i-Ali in Mazar-i-Sharif. The shrine is one of the most famous and widely revered sacred places in Afghanistan © LIZETTE POTGIETER/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.
communities, thereby assimilating and claiming them as Muslim concepts and practices.

Afghans also embraced the metaphysical doctrine of the Persian philosopher Al-Ghazali (Algazel; c. 1058–1011). Called “occasionalism,” this philosophy denies scientific causality in favor of constant and omnipresent divine intervention. Al-Ghazali converted the passive God of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE), called the “Unmoved Mover,” who essentially drags history forward almost as an afterthought, into the “Beloved,” who spurs all created things into action through desire for union with their creator. Moreover, where the Unmoved Mover is the ultimate cause of all events, the Beloved is the intimate cause, literally from moment to moment. Put another way, God’s will provides the occasion for existence (or conversely, existence provides the occasion for God’s will to be enacted).

Hanafism and occasionalism became the bedrocks of the Afghan Islamic worldview, particularly among the Pashtuns, semi-nomadic and tribalistic speakers of a Northeastern Iranian language who have inhabited the territory between the Hindu Kush mountains and the Indus River since the second or first millennium BCE.

In the centuries that followed, the country was carved up and reunited under various empires originating in India, central Asia, Mongolia, and repeatedly, Persia. The last major division before the 19th century came with Babur (1483–1530), who swept into Afghanistan from Ferghana (in modern-day Uzbekistan) and captured Kabul. From there, he invaded Delhi, establishing the Mughal Empire, one of the famous “gunpowder empires” (Islamic empires that boasted considerable military exploits thanks to newly developed firearm technology). The Mughals ruled a large swath of Afghanistan and almost all of the Indian subcontinent until the British overthrew Bahadur Shah Zafar II (1775–1862) in 1857. Meanwhile, the Safavids (1501–1722) of Persia, another gunpowder empire, ruled old Khurasan in the name of Twelver Shiism.

It was during the twilight years of Safavid rule that the Afghans became a military power in their own right. The Safavid shah, Sultan Husayn (1694–1722), attempted to forcibly convert the Pashtuns to Shiism. The Pashtuns violently revolted and briefly established their own empire, presided over by the Hotaki dynasty (1709–38). Hotaki rule encompassed most of modern-day Iran and Afghanistan, as well as parts of Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, and it is often cited today as the start of the historical process that gave rise to Afghanistan as a sovereign nation-state. After a brief return to Persian rule under the Afsharid dynasty (1736–96), self-rule was restored under the Durrani dynasty (1747–1862), another Pashtun family from Kandahar. The Durrans are considered to be the true founders of modern Afghanistan and are also credited with establishing a monarchical tradition that lasted until 1973. The Durrans warred with the Mughals in the east, winning what is now Pakistan, and in the west they conquered Herat from the Qajars (1785–1925), establishing the general contours of what is now the Afghanistan-Iran border.

During the 19th century, Afghanistan was the contested ground in what has been famously called the “Great Game” between the Russian and British Empires. This competition entailed three British invasions of Afghanistan and the drawing of most of Afghanistan’s present borders, most notoriously the Durand Line (1893), which now acts as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. Cutting through the heart of the ancestral territories of the Pashtuns, the Durand Line separated important Afghan cities such as Quetta and Peshawar (the former Durrani winter capital) from the historic centers of political power, Kandahar and Kabul. This border, considered by the majority of Pashtuns as at best imaginary and at worst a violation of their sacred homeland (Pashtunistan), has been central in the fortunes (and misfortunes) of both Pakistan and Afghanistan throughout the last 120 years. It has proven impossible to secure, not only because of its difficult physical geography and perceived artificiality, but also because contraband smugglers, militants, terrorists, and spies have profitably exploited its weakness in pursuit of their various agendas for generations.

Since the beginning, Afghan state-building has been hampered by constant in-fighting and the inability of the central government to exert itself beyond the cities and into the vast countryside. This combination of centrifugal social forces on the periphery and strife in the center has fueled the rise and fall of each of Afghanistan’s various subsequent regimes, monarchical (1747–1973), republican (1973–78), Communist (1978–92), and democratic (since 2001). Arguably, the lone exception to this pattern was the brief era of theocracy under the Taliban (1996–2001), who exhibited the ability to enforce their will upon the majority of the country and to resist succumbing to internal division.

The Taliban first emerged among primarily Pashtun students (their name means “students”) in madrasas...
situated in refugee camps in Pakistan. They had been exiled to these camps by the civil war of the 1980s (waged between Soviet-backed Communists and U.S.-backed Islamists and nationalist militants) and then the subsequent anarchy that broke out between the latter groups from 1992 to 1996. Their madrassas were established and funded by the Pakistani intelligence service and the royal family of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The social environment in these schools was almost totally male, and the young men received absolutely no modern education in mathematics, science, history, or geography, nor even traditional Pashtun skills like farming, herding, and handicraft-making. They did not learn traditional Pashtun knowledge systems such as Pashtunwali, the traditional Pashtun tribal code, which pre-dates Sharia (Islamic law) by two millennia (although distorted fragments nonetheless survived and circulated in the camps), nor their tribal affiliations and clean lineages.

What were the Pakistanis and Saudis hoping to achieve? According to Ahmed Rashid, a journalist and leading expert on the Taliban, the Pakistanis appear to have believed that a monolithically united Afghanistan could simultaneously defuse the so-called “Pashtunistan problem” created by the Durand Line and strengthen their rear in the event of an apocalyptic nuclear war with their longtime enemy, India. The Saudis, for their part, were looking to establish a vanguard for the modern era’s first purely Islamic state—specifically, a Sunni state with which they believed they could have struck an alliance against their Shia rivals in Iran.

The Taliban also had help from Afghanistan’s criminal underworld. Sometime in 1992, they succeeded in establishing an alliance with the transport mafia, a network of black-market truckers who ply the country’s crumbling highways for lucre, smuggling goods from China, the former Soviet Union, India, Iran, and Pakistan. The truckers were seeking to re-secure the highways, which had become divided between the warring factions, and they provided the Taliban with equipment and intelligence, which proved crucial to the movement’s success.

By 1996 the Taliban had achieved de jure control of 85 percent of Afghanistan. (The remaining 15 percent was controlled by the Northern Alliance, a ragtag assortment of Islamists, ex-Communists, nationalists, and crime barons who had been displaced by the Taliban in 1996.) They imposed a 50 percent tax on any company operating in the country, and those who failed to pay were physically attacked; they also imposed a 6 percent import tax on anything brought into the country. By 1998 the Taliban had control of the major airports and border crossings, which allowed them to establish a monopoly on all trade. By 2001 the per capita income in Afghanistan had fallen to less than 200 USD, and the country was close to total economic collapse. And yet, although the Taliban had no annual budget, they reportedly spent 300 million USD a year fighting the Northern Alliance.

Afghanistan’s physical and spiritual landscape was utterly defaced during the Taliban period. Massive deforestation—combined with the collapse of the country’s millennia-old irrigation system, which had already been disrupted by war and abortive midcentury modernization efforts—has desertified much of the country. The Taliban attempted to obliterate the legacies of Afghanistan’s spiritual past, intensely persecuting minority religious groups, including Shias and Sufis, and destroying pre-Islamic artifacts. Most notoriously, in March 2001 the Taliban leadership declared the two massive, sixth-century statues of the Buddha in Bamiyan to be idols and detonated dynamite beneath them, an act decried by the international community.

The Taliban regime was overthrown in 2001 by the combined forces of the Northern Alliance and the U.S. military. They were, however, far from defeated, and after a few years of regrouping they began waging an effective insurgency against the nominally democratic government presided over by Hamid Karzai (1957–). As the Americans prepared to evacuate Afghanistan in 2014, the question looming over the country was whether democracy had the capacity to hang on, or whether it, too, would perish before the social-political forces that devoured all of its predecessors, either devolved into warlordism or succumbed to a resurgent Taliban. There were many causes for concern. For instance, that the cost of maintaining Afghanistan’s new national army while also fighting the Taliban, according to recent statistics, is far larger than the country’s gross domestic product, did not bode well for the future.

**EARLY AND MODERN LEADERS** Mir Wais Hotak (1673–1715) was a Pashtun leader from Kandahar who successfully overthrew the Safavid dynasty and conquered Persia in the name of the Afghans. Although his empire was short-lived—it was conquered in 1738 CE by the legendary Iranian ruler Nader Shah (1688–1747)—the Pashtun monarchy Mir Wais established is widely considered the prototype of the modern Afghan nation-state.
Today he is widely known as “Mirwais Neeka” (“Mirwais the grandfather” in the Pashtun language).

Ahmed Shah Durrani (1722–1772) was a Pashtun leader, believed to have been born in the ancient Khurasani city of Herat. Through armed conquest against the Persians and Indians, he paved the way for Afghanistan to emerge as a modern sovereign nation-state. His mausoleum is located in Kandahar, adjacent to the Khirqa Mubarak, the Shrine of the Cloak of Prophet Muhammad, in the center of the city. Afghans often refer to him as “Ahmed Shah Baba” (“Ahmed Shah the Father” in the Pashtun language).

Mohammed Zahir Shah (1914–2007), the last king of Afghanistan, introduced a constitutional monarchy in 1964, opening the door to democracy and the formation of political parties. He was overthrown by his cousin, Mohammed Daoud Khan (1909–1978), who initiated the Republic of Afghanistan and assumed the office of president in 1973. In the subsequent turmoil, Zahir Shah emerged as a symbolic and nostalgic figure for many Afghans. After nearly three decades in exile in Italy, he returned to Afghanistan in 2002 to great fanfare, including several public calls to reestablish the monarchy. Despite his widespread popularity, Zahir Shah was obliged to publicly step aside because there was concern that he would be an obstacle to the establishment of a democratic system of government in Afghanistan.

The Communist Party ousted Daoud in 1978. Some of the major figures in the subsequent jihad against the Communist regime and the invading Soviet army included Sibghatullah Mojaddedi (1926– ), Burhanuddin Rabbani (1940–2011), Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (1947– ), and his arch-nemesis, Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001). Massoud, an ethnic Tajik nicknamed the “Shir-e-Panjshir” (“Lion of the Panjshir” in the Dari language), was a central military figure in the struggles against the Soviets and the Taliban. Many military experts, including Soviet ones, considered Massoud to be a unique tactical genius. He was assassinated on September 9, 2001, two days before the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. It is widely believed that al-Qaeda carried out his murder.

Hamid Karzai headed the interim government of Afghanistan from 2001 to 2004, when he was elected president. In 2009 he was elected to a second term. Karzai has been a lightning rod of controversy, including accusations of nepotism, corruption, electoral fraud, and the involvement of his own family in the drug trade. Mullah Mohammed Omar (1959– ) is the enigmatic spiritual leader of the Taliban, of whom very little photographic evidence exists. Apart from the fact that he is missing an eye, accounts of his physical appearance are contradictory. He was Afghanistan’s de facto 11th head of state from 1996 to late 2001, under the official title Head of the Supreme Council. He also held the title Commander of the Faithful of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, which was recognized by only three nations: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. As of 2013, he was thought to be living in Quetta, Pakistan, under the protection of Pakistani intelligence and coordinating the ongoing Taliban insurgency against the United States.

**MAJOR THEOLOGIANS AND AUTHORS** A number of noted Afghan authors were Sufi philosophers whose writings encapsulate Sufi mysticism, which has played a significant role in Afghanistan and central Asia in general. These philosopher-poets include Abdullah Ansari of Herat (11th century); Sanayi of Ghazni (12th century), who wrote the first mystical poetry in Dari; Rumi (Jalal ad-Din Muhammad; 1207–1273), whose Masnavi, comprising more than 25,000 verses, is believed to be among the greatest works of poetry written in Persian; and Maulana Nuruddin Jami of Herat (15th century), who is regarded as the last great Persian mystical poet.

A key but controversial figure during the 19th century was Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), a modernist reformer whose writings deeply impacted the early Pan-Islamic political movement. His ideology centered on a critique of European imperialism and a call for Muslim solidarity. There remains much debate as to whether he was Afghan in the proper sense, i.e., born and raised in what is now called Afghanistan. He appears to have been of Pashtun ethnicity, but there is evidence that he was born and raised in western Iran. Al-Afghani’s ideology has been described as a welding of traditional religious antipathy toward non-Muslims “to a modern critique of Western imperialism and an appeal for the unity of Islam,” urging the adoption of Western sciences and institutions that might strengthen Islam as a political-transnational entity.

Rumi

Sufi philosopher and poet Rumi (Jalal ad-Din Muhammad; 1207–1273) is revered as one of the world’s greatest religious poets. Rumi was born near Balkh, at the time an important Sufi cultural center, in 1207. Rumi’s father was a religious scholar, and he grew up surrounded by thinkers and writers. As a young man he met the great Sufi writer Farid al-Din Attar (c. 1142–c.1220), whose poetry would be an important influence on Rumi’s later work. In 1225 Rumi married Gowhar Khatun; they had two sons. In 1228 he settled in Konya in modern-day south-central Turkey, which remained his home for the remainder of his life. He engaged in religious studies and often gave sermons at the mosque.

Rumi began writing poetry as a means of mourning the tragic death of his friend, the dervish Shams al-Din Tabrizi (1185–1248). Rumi’s most influential text, the *Masnavi* (or *Mathnawi*), is considered by some to be the greatest work of religious literature ever written. The text is composed of more than 25,000 rhyming couplets divided into six books. Written in Persian, the verses summarize Sufi beliefs and offer parables and stories to help readers understand these teachings and apply them to their lives. In his preface to the book, Rumi describes it as containing “the roots of the roots of the roots of the [Islamic] Faith.” Rumi died in 1273 and is buried in Konya. His tomb remains a popular pilgrimage site. Centuries after it was written, the *Masnavi* continues to draw scholarly interest and has been widely translated.

(1909–1977), Sayyid Shamsuddin Majruh (b. 1904), and Zia Qarizada (1922–2008), Ehsan Azari (1958– ) , a contemporary philosopher, continues the Afghan tradition of syncretism, particularly on the topic of psychoanalysis and Sufism.

**HOUSES OF WORSHIP AND HOLY PLACES** Among the famous mosques in Afghanistan are the Id Gah Mosque and Shah-Do-Shamshira Mosque in Kabul, the Masjid-i-Jami in Herat, the Mosque of Ali in Mazar-i-Sharif, and the mosque of Kandahar, where the Khirqa Mubarak, the cloak of the Prophet Muhammad, is enshrined. Although the worship of saints and shrines is tacitly forbidden in Islam, Afghans attribute magical powers to these local sites, and pilgrims converge upon them in annual festivals, seeking miraculous cures and supernatural assistance. Amulets called *tawiz* that purportedly can cure diseases are dispensed at these shrines.

**WHAT IS SACRED** Afghans consider the Koran both a sacred text and a sacred object that possesses miraculous powers. The graves of Sufi saints, religious martyrs, and *malang* (wandering mendicants) are considered sacred, as are *ziarat* (shrines), places where holy relics are kept. The shrine of Hazrat-i-Ali (Caliph Ali) in Mazar-i-Sharif is one of the most famous and widely revered sacred places in Afghanistan. The shrine of Khirqa Mubarak (the Prophet Muhammad’s holy cloak) in Kandahar is another such place. When the Taliban captured Kandahar in 1996, Mullah Mohammed Omar took the cloak of the Prophet out of the shrine and held it before the gathered crowd as a way to unite the different Taliban factions and to legitimize his position as “Amir al-Mu’minin” (“Commander of the Faithful,” an ancient Islamic leadership title with strong implications of divine sanction).

**HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS** Afghans celebrate the main Muslim religious festivals, such as Id-i-Qurban (Feast of the Sacrifice, called Eid al-Adha in some parts of the world), Id-i-Ramazan (Festival of Breaking Fast, marking the end of Ramadan; elsewhere, often called Eid al-Fitr), and Id-i-Mawlid (the Prophet’s birthday). The Tenth of Muharram Martyr’s Day, is observed by the Shia minority to commemorate the death of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Sunni Afghans also consider this a solemn occasion. Nowroz, the New Year’s celebration, which falls on the first day of spring and the first day of the Afghan solar calendar, was originally a Zoroastrian holiday and has traditionally been a time of great festivities. During the Taliban’s rule, its leaders adopted the Islamic lunar calendar in 1998 and banned Nowroz as an “ancient pagan holiday centered on fire worship.” After the Taliban regime was defeated, Nowroz was reinstated.

**MODE OF DRESS** There used to be variation of dress across Afghanistan, arising from the country’s numerous religious and ethnic minorities and, of course, the differences between the Pashtuns and Dari-speakers. These included different colors, fabrics, and patterns, and
sometimes Western clothing. Nevertheless, certain general patterns prevailed. Prior to the rise of the Taliban, Afghan attire for women typically included a long dress called a peran over tumban (trousers) and a chador (shawl), covering the head. Women in villages were associated with wearing the head-to-toe burqa veil, called chadari, although there exists some debate as to how widespread such attire actually was in rural areas. There is also debate about whether the chadari is even Islamic in origin, or really an article of Pashtunwali. Whatever the truth, though, prior to the Taliban, who deemed it Islamic, the chadari was generally considered traditional, and most educated urban women aspiring to be modern did not wear it, especially in urban areas.

Likewise, prior to the Taliban, men typically wore loose cotton trousers, long-tailed shirts extending over the trousers, and a wide waist sash. Sleeveless vests were worn over the shirts. Men wore skullcaps called kulah, over which turbans called lungi were tied. Typical footwear were chapli (sandals) and leather shoes called paizar. In urban areas, especially Kabul, people commonly wore articles of European clothing, such as jackets, jeans, dresses, shoes, and boots.

During the Taliban’s rule, both men and women were required to abide by a strict dress code. Men were compelled to shed all articles of Western clothing and wear the Pakistani shalwar-kameez (baggy trousers and long shirt), as well as to cover their heads with a cap or turban and grow beards that had to be at least as long as a clenched fist. Failure to comply would be met with extreme physical violence, especially for women. Since the end of the Taliban’s rule in 2001, the male dress code has been abandoned in many parts of the country, primarily in the cities, although in the countryside it remains prudent for most men to don traditional garb. The chadari, however, remains ubiquitous throughout the country; many women calculate that it is safer, because wearing even the peran could be considered too non-traditional by Taliban insurgents.

**DIETARY PRACTICES** Afghans follow the dietary codes of Islam. For example, the consumption of alcohol and pork is forbidden. Some urban dwellers educated in the West or in the former Soviet Union consumed alcohol that was once available in exclusive restaurants in Kabul until the fall of the Communist regime in 1991. While some Afghans may violate the prohibition on alcohol, even those living in Europe and the United States strictly observe the prohibition on pork.

Despite a well-established Islamic interdiction, a large number of Afghans produce and use drugs, such as bars (marijuana), taryak (opium), and heroin. Indeed, Afghanistan has emerged as the greatest illicit opium
producer in the world. The U.S. military occupation seems to have had little success in reducing production; indeed, according to United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) data, there was more opium poppy cultivation in just four years of American occupation (2004–2007) than in any one year during Taliban rule. The Taliban has had a contradictory relationship to opium. Despite ideologically abhorring drug use, the Taliban has actively encouraged (and even threatened and blackmailed) Afghanistan’s agricultural sector into opium cultivation as a means of financially sustaining themselves. According to a UN Security Council report released in 2012, the Taliban’s income in 2011 was an estimated $400 million, mostly from protection rackets (that is, Afghans pay the Taliban to “protect” them from the Taliban) and the sale of opium (in the form of “taxes” imposed upon opium farmers).

When opium production began during anti-Soviet resistance, it was rationalized as a useful tool in the struggle for freedom. Since 1996, however, the Taliban has justified it as a cornerstone in jihad against the West—which the Taliban views as imperialistic and decadent, and hence deserving of the poison. However, Matthew Lacouture argues in his 2008 essay “Narcoterrorism in Afghanistan” that this line of reasoning fails when appropriately scrutinized, given that 30 percent of Afghanistan’s heroin enters Iran, a fellow Islamic state (although, again, the Taliban can claim that, as Shias, Iranians are not “authentically” Muslim). Furthermore, heroin addiction has taken hold in Afghanistan to a startling degree: 3 percent of the crop is retained and used domestically, and more than 200,000 Afghans have turned to opium-derived drugs in desperate escapism. That the Taliban has the ideological potential and organizational capacity to rectify its behavior on this issue is evidenced by a decision it made just before it was overthrown. Very briefly in 2000, the Taliban leadership, in coordination with the United Nations, conducted what is said to have been one of the world’s most successful anti-drug campaigns, with a 99 percent reduction in Taliban-controlled areas (roughly three-quarters of the world’s supply of heroin at the time). The Taliban reverted to its previous positions after the American invasion, which in their eyes confirmed the West’s depravity.

RITUALS Afghans follow the obligatory codified rituals of Sunni Islam, known as the Five Pillars of Islam, which include shahadah (profession of the faith), salat (prayer five times a day), zakat (alms to the poor), ruza (marriage certificate), and recites Koranic marriage injunctions (or qazi) validating the union, issues the nikahnamah (marriage certificate), and recites Koranic marriage injunctions during the wedding ceremony.

Afghans follow Islamic burial rites. A mullah oversees the preparation of the body and says a prayer for the dead, the dawa-i jenaza. Afghans follow a 40-day mourning period, marked by various observances, such as relatives gathering at the grave site on the 14th day after burial. Mourning culminates on the 40th day, or ruzi-ebel, with a qari (reciter) reading from the Koran.

MEMBERSHIP The population of Afghanistan was around 31 million as of 2013, although this number includes the 2.7 million Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and Iran. Islam is the religion of more than 99 percent of the country, with an estimated 80 to 89 percent of the population practicing Sunnism in the Hanafi tradition and 10 to 19 percent practicing Shiism, primarily Twelver Shiism, but with small
SOCIAL JUSTICE  Depending on how one views pre-modern or traditional systems of resource distribution and gender relations, Afghanistan has arguably always been plagued by social injustice, whether from the inequalities inherent to feudalism, the vulnerabilities inherent to relegating women strictly to the private sphere, or the upheavals inherent to the vendettas that often beset tribal societies.

Modernization campaigns, especially in the mid- and late-20th century, largely exacerbated these problems by fragmenting existing social structures, thereby destroying whatever merit they once possessed, while also singularly failing to replace them with a new social contract. Between 1992 and 1996, there was absolutely no social contract, much less social order, to speak of in Afghanistan. One can easily imagine how attractive the Taliban must have initially appeared, but the justice they offered was soon revealed to be severe and repressive. The nominally democratic order established after 2001 has been little better than the anarchy before the Taliban.

In the pursuit of halting anarchy, the Taliban, ironically, became the agents of anarchy. They avow an uncompromising literal interpretation of what they believe to be divine law. Moreover, they believe in a particularly totalitarian version of divine law—one without consideration for the differences between the public and private spheres of life, and which almost totally lacks proscriptive content, much less mercy. Consequently, Taliban officials implemented punishments stipulated in Sharia called *hudud*, which traditionally includes stoning to death for adultery and amputation of arms for theft.

In the democratic regime established after the fall of the Taliban, there has been some progress in the restoration of human rights, at least formally. Particular progress is said to have been attained in the field of women’s rights. For instance, women are permitted to drive cars, engage in sports, and have professions or own businesses. There exists a Ministry of Women’s Affairs, and the military has a number of female officers. Several women have also served in the National Assembly. However, as the United States prepared to militarily withdraw in 2014, many feared that these gains would be reversed. For instance, in March 2012, Karzai endorsed a code of conduct developed by clerics, which, among other things, forbids women from traveling without a male guardian. Also, according to Afghanistan’s human rights commission, violent crime against women in Afghanistan hit record levels in 2013.

SOCIAL LIFE  As Muslims, Afghan men are permitted to marry Muslim women as well as *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book, i.e., Jews and Christians). Marriage with non-Muslims who are not People of the Book, including Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists, is forbidden. Afghan Muslim women are permitted to marry only Muslim men. Within the family, the male head of the household has the obligation, as stipulated by Islam, to provide for his family’s material needs, while the female head of the household is responsible for taking charge of domestic affairs and the care and upbringing of children.

POLITICAL IMPACT  Religion has had a tremendous political impact upon Afghanistan throughout its entire history. Yet, prior to the Taliban era, Islam’s impact upon the political system could perhaps best be described as supplying a general worldview more than a concrete political and legal system. That is because Islam often reformed the political landscape instead of revolutionizing it, assimilating many preexisting structures and subtly changing them—and being changed by them. Put another way, Sharia (Islamic law), in conjunction with Pashtunwali, provided a conceptual framework as well as certain concrete habits of reasoning that directly affected legislation and jurisprudence. Yet the legislative and jurisprudential goals of this framework appear to have never really been theocratic, but rather, conservative. Perhaps this is most evident in the Afghans’ institutional choices, particularly to establish a kingdom rather than, say, an ulemate (as the Afghans’ neighbors in Iran repeatedly attempted, ultimately succeeding in 1979). In Afghanistan, even Communism exhibited conservatism, integrating many elements of Sharia and Pashtunwali into its law code and ideology.

In Afghanistan, the upending of the established order began with the overthrow of monarchism by republicanism in 1973 but did not fully culminate until 1992, when the collapse of the Communist regime transformed the country into a stateless territory. It was into the subsequent void that the Taliban were able to establish their exceedingly regressive ideology. Both during and after their period of rule, the Taliban have denounced any and all
forms of modern state-planning—from infrastructure development to economic planning to elections—as hubris, an attempt to substitute human will for divine will. According to the Taliban’s ideology, statecraft boils down to prayer, fasting, and fighting.

In trying to understand the nature of the Taliban’s ideology, it might help to think of the era of their rule as an Islamic analogue of the Communist Khmer Rouge, which briefly ruled Cambodia (1975–79) with equally disastrous results. There are many similarities between them, the most startling of which is that both regimes sought to completely reset their societies to an idealized (and entirely imaginary) pre-modern way of life; for example, the Khmer Rouge’s Year Zero and the Taliban’s emirate. For both regimes, it was believed that this renewed pre-modernity would be consistent with both local history and the edicts of the spiritual world. Yet the Khmer Rouge believed their policies would eventually be productive for the material well-being of Cambodia; the Taliban, by contrast, was utterly disinterested in the physical fate of Afghanistan.

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES Although the Western media has focused on human rights issues and the treatment of women in Afghanistan, both of which remain a problem in the post-Taliban period, the larger issues are, on the one hand, theocratic Islam, represented by the Taliban, and on the other hand, what could be described as warlordism, represented by the current government’s various governors who were previously militants and who maintain their own patronage networks and militias. Very often, Afghanistan’s various provinces almost seem like de facto statelets. These issues, combined with opium production, are the main obstacle to peace and prosperity in Afghanistan.

CULTURAL IMPACT In Afghanistan, it is difficult to determine precisely where Islam really begins and its spiritual predecessors end. Afghan Islamic literature exhibits an ambivalence that tends to give way to tolerance, even pluralism, with respect to other religions. For instance, Ghaznavid-era (962–1186) texts abound with references to the beauty of Buddhist monuments, indicating that monasteries and mosques functioned peacefully, side by side. Asadi Tusi (d. 1072) described the splendor of Kabul’s Subahar (Su Vihara) monastery in his 1048 work Garsasp Name, and poetry of the era often used the phrase “as beautiful as Nawbahar” (Nava Vihara, a Buddhist monastery near Balkh) as a simile for palaces. References to Buddhist communities do not completely vanish until after 1336, and even then, their presence can still be felt in terminology. For instance, the Arabic term al-budd and the Persian word bor are probably derived from Islam’s interaction with Buddhism in Afghanistan. Originally, the Umayyads (661–750) used the Arabic term as an appellation for Buddhist and Hindu religious images, and in 11th-century literature, the Persian term signified an ideal of asexual beauty. Gradually, these also came to have a negative connotation: “idol.” Indeed, the Taliban probably had this latter connotation in mind when they decided to destroy the Buddha statues of Bamiyan in March 2001.

Nevertheless, Islam has pervaded every aspect of Afghan since the early modern period. Even then, however, Afghans were traditionally not puritanical, perhaps precisely because their notion of Islam was vast. They had a long-established appreciation of art, music, and poetry. Thus, even though normative Islam formally forbids the depiction of the human form, painting and drawing were widely taught in Afghan schools. Indeed, during King Zahir’s reign in the mid-20th century, there was active government patronage of the local artistic traditions, drama, and Afghan music. Promising students were sent overseas on government scholarships for training as actors, playwrights, musicians, and painters. There was also great interest in Afghanistan’s cultural heritage, including its Greek and Buddhist archaeological monuments and treasures. Thus, many Afghans were shocked and outraged over the looting and destruction of the collection in the Kabul Museum and the destruction of the colossal buddhas in Bamiyan by the Taliban.

It was during the Taliban era that religious restrictions were imposed upon aspects of life that were traditionally outside the scrutiny of, or restriction by, religious authorities. The Taliban banned cassettes, movies, television, dancing, singing, playing drums, flying kites, photography, and drawing images of humans or animals. When many of these restrictions were lifted in early post-Taliban Afghanistan, ardent fundamentalists in the government expressed their desire for a return to Taliban codes regulating the arts and artistic expression. Today, Taliban-esque restrictions appear to be inconsistently applied across the country, sometimes formally, often informally.

Other Religions

Given its long and complex past, Afghanistan has a rich sprinkling of minority religious and spiritual groups.
It is known that, before the Soviet invasion, Afghanistan had 25,000 Hindus and 15,000 Sikhs, as well as a small Jewish community of about 2,000, mostly in the cities. It is difficult to get precise numbers today. There are about 4,000 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus living in different cities—mostly in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Kandahar—and they have had a degree of political representation. Unconfirmed reports state that there anywhere between 500 and 8,000 Afghan Christians practicing their faith secretly in the country.

Afghanistan was also an important frontier zone for the Bahá’í Faith in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There were about 19,500 Afghan Bahá’ís in 1990 and 23,075 in 2000, but in 2007 the U.S. government estimated the Bahá’í population under the Taliban had fallen to about 400 (300 of whom were in Kabul). Today it is not known exactly how many Bahá’ís remain in Afghanistan. The expatriate community in the West and India claims 2,000 members, and 50 Afghan Bahá’ís attended a regional conference in India in 2008.

Shia Islam is practiced by as much as 19 percent of Afghans. The majority of them are Twelvers, primarily concentrated among the Hazara ethnicity. The next-largest Twelver community are the Farsiwan of Herat and Farah provinces. Other, far smaller, Afghan Twelver communities include the Bayat and Qizilbash populations of Turkish origin, as well as the some of the Sayeds. A smaller portion of Afghan Shia are Nizari Isma’ilis (Seveners); these populations include many of the Pamir language speakers of the northeastern portion of the country (predominantly in Badakhshan Province bordering Tajikistan).

Baghlan Province is also home to an Isma’ili population, led by a hereditary leadership. It is said that 10,000 Isma’ili militiamen defended the Baghlan Isma’ili stronghold of Kayan against militants in an alliance with the Soviets.

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See Also Vol. 1: Islam, Shiism, Sunnism, Zoroastrianism

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