

I. Land, People, and Culture

Geography, demography, and culture are among the great “givens” of life. They can influence every aspect of our existence. Knowing about them is the first step in learning about a state, its peoples, and its policies.

Afghanistan is slightly smaller than Texas, roughly 647,500 square kilometers. Looking at the map, its most dominant feature is the Hindu Kush mountains, which rise to 7,485 meters and cover all but the north central and southwest portions of the country.¹ Even Kabul, the capital, lies at 1,789 meters in elevation. Semi-desert terrain is common in the south and west and in the flatter areas. Snow melt and a handful of rivers, aided by intricate and sometimes ancient irrigation systems, bring water to farmland in many regions. Only 14 percent of the land is arable, a great limitation since farming and herding are the most common occupations. Afghanistan has as much as \$1 trillion to \$3 trillion in mineral wealth, much of which was recently rediscovered and not yet exploited.²

Politically, Afghanistan today has an external border with Pakistan measuring 2,430 kilometers (km), disputed since it was drawn by the British along the Durand Line in 1893. It also has a border in the west with Iran measuring 936 km as well as significant borders with the former Soviet republics and now independent nations of Turkmenistan (744 km), Uzbekistan (137 km), and Tajikistan (1,206 km). There is also a short border with China (76 km) in the mountainous, sparsely populated Wakhan Corridor in the northeast. Internally, Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces, which are subdivided into nearly 400 districts. Afghanistan has a poor nationwide transportation network. A primary road, often referred to as the Ring Road, connects the major cities: Kabul in the

east, Kandahar in the south, Herat in the west, and Mazar-i-Sharif in the north. It was built with U.S. and Soviet help in the 1960s and rebuilt by the United States, its coalition partners, and international financial institutions (IFIs) after 2001. Other primary roads connect Kabul to Jalalabad in the east, not far from the Pakistan border. Another major road runs from Kandahar in the south to the Chaman crossing, and then into the Baluchistan Province of Pakistan. To compete with the Pakistani geographic advantage, India and Iran have also built new roads, one of which runs north from the Iranian port of Charbahar into the province of Nimruz in Afghanistan, ultimately linking up with the Ring Road in Delaram. Another Iranian-built road connects Islam Qala with Herat in western Afghanistan. Thousands of kilometers of secondary and tertiary roads have been built by allied forces, supporting aid agencies, and IFIs. American generals and diplomats generally agree with the pithy observation of the current Ambassador and former commanding general, Karl Eikenberry: “Where the roads end, the Taliban begins.”³

Air and rail assets present a contrast. Air travel is fairly well developed for such a poor country. There are major airports in Kabul, at the Bagram military facility north of Kabul, and in Kandahar. Mazar-i-Sharif is the logistic hub to the north, and Jalalabad in the east, and Herat and Shindand in the far west, also have airports. There are only 75 km of railroad, connecting the north to Uzbekistan.

The population of Afghanistan is uncertain, but most experts believe it to be in the range of 28–30 million people. Despite substantial repatriation, more than two million Afghans remain refugees in Iran and Pakistan. The population is young, with 44.6 percent under the age of 15 years. The relatively high growth rate of 2.6 percent is moderated by some of the highest infant and child mortality rates in the world. Life expectancy is 44

years. Less than 25 percent of Afghans live in urban areas compared to 67 percent of Iraqis. By definition, reconstruction or construction in Afghanistan will be about rural areas, which are some of the least developed in the world. On the UN Human Development Index, which measures the health, education, and economic life of a nation, Afghanistan has been consistently ranked in the bottom 10 countries in the world.

Afghanistan is a multiethnic Muslim state. The most dominant group is the Pashtuns (also called Pathans, Pushtuns, or Pakhtoons), estimated at 40–42 percent of the population. There may be as many as 400 tribes and clans of Pashtuns, although the war, refugee life, and the Taliban have subverted the power of tribal and clan leaders. The Pashtuns tend to live in the eastern and southern parts of the country, but pockets of Pashtuns can be found in the north. While there are approximately 12 million Pashtuns in Afghanistan, there are twice as many in Pakistan, mainly in the eastern parts, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (the former Northwest Frontier Province), the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Baluchistan, and around Karachi. The 2,400 km border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is often ignored by Pashtun tribes living near it. Inside Afghanistan, perhaps the greatest intra-Pashtun fault line is between southern or Durrani Pashtuns and the eastern or Ghilzai Pashtuns. Inside Pakistan, tensions between Islamabad and the semiautonomous tribes are constant. The Pashtun tribes in the FATA of Pakistan and elsewhere have formed their own insurgent groups in recent years, the most notable of which is the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan.⁴

The other major Afghan groups are the Tajiks at 27–30 percent, the Hazara at 15 percent, and the Uzbek and Turkmen at 9–10 percent of the total population. The remaining 13 percent or so come from smaller minorities: Nuristani, Pashai, Aimaq, and others. Languages are also mixed,

with about half speaking Dari (Afghan Persian, the lingua franca); 35 percent speaking Pashto (or Pushtu, the language of the Pashtun); and 11 percent—mostly Uzbek and Turkmen—speaking Turkic languages. There are 30 known minor languages also spoken in Afghanistan.

Three groups dominate the non-Pashtun segment of Afghans. Together, they constitute a majority of the population. The Dari-speaking Tajiks are the second largest group. They are nontribal and dominate the populations of Kabul, Mazar-i-Sharif, and Herat. Most nonurban Tajiks are spread across the northeastern part of the country including the famous Panjshir Valley. While most Tajiks are farmers, they have “historically been the bedrock of the merchant community, bureaucrats, and educated clergy” in Afghanistan.⁵ Many analysts believed that the Tajik formations under the late Commander Ahmed Shah Massoud were the most effective fighters in the anti-Soviet war. They formed the core of the Northern Alliance that retook Kabul in the fall of 2001.

The Hazaras, the next largest group, live mainly in the central high plateau and in the north. Many of them have distinctive Mongol-like features. Because of their appearance and the fact that most Hazaras are Shia Muslims, they have often been treated badly by other Afghans, with the Taliban being the last to mistreat them. For most of the modern era, aside from the Taliban period of rule, the Sunni-Shia schism has not been as divisive a factor in Afghanistan as it has been in Iraq.

The Turkic-speaking Uzbeks and Turkmen make up 10 percent of the Afghan population. Many Uzbek and Turkmen families moved from their non-Afghan homelands in Central Asia in the 20th century when the Bolsheviks took over all of the republics of the then–Soviet Union. The Uzbeks and Turkmen are famous for carpets and karakul sheep. The Uzbeks are considered highly effective fighters on the ground or on horseback.

Most Afghans (not “Afghanis,” which refers to the local currency and is considered by some Afghans as bad form if used to refer to people) are Sunni Muslims (80 percent), with the balance—mainly Hazaras—being Shia Muslims. Prior to the Soviet invasion of 1979, many observers saw Afghans as rather laid-back Muslims. Tribal ways that run counter to Islam may still hold sway in a few isolated areas. Pashtuns are defined by their tribes and their folkways. As noted, however, these tribal structures have been severely stressed by wars. Many who grew up in Pakistani refugee camps lost track of their tribal roots, leaving them much more open to the influence of religious figures, called mullahs, and other nontribal leaders. In all, the strict observance of Islam has grown across Afghanistan since the war with the Soviet Union.

Since the Pashtuns dominate the nation’s leadership as well as that of the Taliban, it is important to delve deeper into their culture. Pashtun culture revolves around the Pashtunwali, their pre-Islamic code of honor. It emphasizes honor, hospitality, protection of women, and revenge. Louis Dupree, the late eminent Western specialist on Afghanistan, described the Pashtunwali this way:

to avenge blood
to fight to the death for a person who has taken refuge with me
no matter what his lineage
to defend to the last any property entrusted to me
to be hospitable and provide for the safety of guests
to refrain from killing a woman, a Hindu, a minstrel, or a boy
not yet circumcised
to pardon an offense on the intercession of a woman of the
offender’s lineage, a Sayyid, or a Mullah

*to punish all adulterers with death
to refrain from killing a man who has entered a mosque or a
shrine of a holy man . . . also to spare the life of a man who
begs for quarter in battle.*⁶

Pashtun culture has helped to keep Afghanistan independent, but it has also helped to make it a fractious place, rife with internal violence within and between families and clans. Even conflict between cousins is a thread in all too many stories in this part of the world. Pashtuns, however, have a tradition of tribal assemblies, or *jirgas*, that help them to resolve problems and make group decisions. The term *shura*, an Arabic expression meaning consultation, is also used to denote smaller consultative groupings. On a few occasions, the entire Afghan nation has formed a grand assembly, a *loya jirga*, to approve a constitution or select a national leader.

Xenophobia is another aspect of Afghan culture. Throughout Afghanistan, suspicion of foreigners is strong. This no doubt stems from insularity and frequent invasions. Afghans are independence-minded. The Pashtun warning to the government and to foreigners says it all: don't touch our women, our treasure, or our land. Non-Pashtun Afghans—58 percent of the population—generally share this attitude and have their own set of hard feelings toward the dominant Pashtuns. Afghans of all stripes have a strong sense of personal and national honor.

The Pashtuns form the largest group of Afghans and account for nearly all of today's insurgents inside the country. The Taliban (literally “students”) started as an organized group in 1994. Although led by Afghan Pashtuns, Pakistan has supported the movement from the outset. The Taliban's roots reach back to the war with the Soviets and to the refugee Islamic school *madrassa* (*madaris* in the plural form) found in

Pakistan and in the countryside of southern Afghanistan. Often funded by Muslim charities from the Gulf, these madaris were rudimentary religious schools, but they were among the few schools of any sort that were open to Afghans or Afghan refugees during the civil war. The mullahs also fed and often housed their pupils. In these schools, country mullahs taught their often illiterate students to memorize the Koran and the *hadith*—the sayings of the Prophet. The students also learned to revere the conduct of jihad as holy war and observe the pure practices of the original Islam.

Many students became religious zealots, dedicated, honest, and without much to lose. Their beliefs were anti-Western and antimaterialist and favored old-time Islam, thus closely paralleling what Salafists preached. Ahmed Rashid, a Pakistani scholar-journalist, saw the Taliban this way:

These boys were from a generation that had never seen their country at peace. . . . They had no memories of their tribes, their elders, their neighbors nor the complex ethnic mix of peoples that often made up their villages and their homeland. These boys were what the war had thrown up like the sea's surrender on the beach of history. They had no memories of the past, no plans for the future while the present was everything. They were literally the orphans of the war, the rootless and the restless, the jobless and the economically deprived with little self-knowledge. They admired war because it was the only occupation they could possibly adapt to. Their simple belief in a messianic, puritan Islam which had been drummed into them by simple village mullahs was the only prop they could hold on to and which gave their lives some meaning.⁷

Part Pashtunwali, part radical Islam, and part the blowback of war, the Taliban would first rescue their country from lawlessness and then abuse it, alienating the population and opening Afghanistan to international ridicule. The Taliban, however, would survive an ouster and later create an insurgency to try to take back power.

In all, the effects of geography, demography, and culture will echo through the history of Afghanistan. First, the country is rugged, landlocked, and difficult to get around in. It is also hard to conduct trade or military operations in such terrain. The lack of good roads combines with high elevations to complicate commerce, logistics, and military operations. Local Afghans are accustomed to the terrain and can outmaneuver the untrained or heavily burdened foreigner. Limited urbanization puts harsh demands on those who seek to protect the population as well. Geographic conditions also complicate the supply of a major expeditionary force operating 7,000 miles from the continental United States. Supplies have to be flown in, or more often, arrive by sea in Karachi, southern Pakistan, and must be trucked the length or width of the country to find an entryway into Afghanistan. Alternatively, supplies can follow a more tortuous northern route through southern Russia and Central Asia into northern Afghanistan. Another route begins in southeast Iran, but that, of course, is not available to the United States.

Second, Afghanistan is not rich in farmland or other natural resources. A low-level of factor endowments makes poverty a natural condition. Iran and Pakistan control the outlets to the sea and to major markets. Afghanistan has great potential mineral wealth, but it has been whispered about for decades and will require enormous investment and many years to exploit fully. Moreover, many developing countries have

had great difficulties managing the foreign extraction of oil or minerals and subsequently absorbing and disbursing the profits.

Third, geography favors local and tribal power structures. While officials in Kabul have usually favored centralized arrangements, local officials or tribal leaders have always held much residual power over their populations. The highest powers in the capital have always had to contend with local power centers. The most successful Afghan rulers have found ways to control, co-opt, or otherwise work with tribal or regional leaders. In the end, all politics in Afghanistan is local in extremis.

Finally, by the ironies of fate, Afghanistan has always stood between contending powers, whether they came from Arabia, Iran, Russia, Great Britain, al Qaeda, the United States, or even India and Pakistan. Greeks, Persians, Arabs, and Mongols—Genghis Khan, Timur, Babur—as well as the British Raj, have had a turn at making war in Afghanistan. It is not true that Afghanistan has never been conquered. It is, however, accurate to note that the physical conquest of Afghanistan has often brought only a temporary Pyrrhic victory. National security policy has often had to contend with the situation described by “the Iron Amir,” Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1880 to 1901:

How can a small power like Afghanistan, which is like a goat between these lions, or a grain of wheat between these two strong millstones of the grinding mill, stand in the midway of the stones without being crushed to death?⁸