

## Afghanistan Background & History – Reading

**Afghanistan**, a nation in southwestern Asia, has towering mountains, scorching deserts, fertile valleys, and rolling plains. Afghanistan is landlocked; it is surrounded by six other countries and so does not have a seacoast. The country is bordered by Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan on the north, China on the far northeast, Pakistan on the east and south, and Iran on the west.

Afghanistan is one of the world's least developed countries. Most Afghan workers farm the land, and many use old-fashioned farming tools and methods. Some of the people are *nomads*—that is, people who move from place to place with their herds of sheep or goats. Kabul is the capital and largest city of Afghanistan.

Afghanistan ethnic map

Almost all the people of Afghanistan are Muslims. The religion of the Muslims, Islam, is the chief common link among them. The population of Afghanistan consists of about 20 ethnic groups, most of which are divided into several tribes. Most of the ethnic groups have distinct languages and cultures. The variety of ethnic groups has made it difficult for Afghanistan to develop into a unified, modern nation.



### History

**The Anglo-Afghan wars.** During the 1800's, the United Kingdom and Russia competed for control of Afghanistan. Russia wanted an outlet to the Indian Ocean and began to expand toward Afghanistan. The United Kingdom wanted to protect its empire in India, which was threatened by Russia's expansion. In 1839, British troops invaded Afghanistan to reduce Russia's influence in the region. The invasion set off the First Anglo-Afghan War, which lasted until the British withdrew in 1842. Russian influence near Afghanistan increased during the mid-1800's.

In 1878, the United Kingdom invaded the country again, starting the Second Anglo-Afghan War. The British found it difficult to establish control of Afghanistan. In 1880, Abdur Rahman Khan became amir. The British agreed to recognize his authority over the country's internal affairs. In return, Abdur Rahman accepted the United Kingdom's control of Afghanistan's foreign relations. During his reign, Abdur Rahman worked to strengthen the national government and to reduce the power of tribal leaders. After he died in 1901, his policies were continued by his son Habibullah Khan.

**Independence.** Early in 1919, Habibullah Khan was assassinated. One of his sons, Amanullah Khan, then became amir and attacked British troops in India, beginning the Third Anglo-Afghan War. The United Kingdom had just finished fighting in World War I (1914-1918). It decided to end its involvement in Afghanistan rather than fight another war. In August 1919, Afghanistan became fully independent.

**The mid-1900's.** By the early 1950's, Afghanistan had developed good relations with the United States and many Western European nations. But the Afghans feared the intentions of the Soviet Union, their country's powerful Communist neighbor. In 1953, Muhammad Daoud Khan, the king's cousin and brother-in-law, took control of the government and made himself prime minister. Under Daoud, Afghanistan took no side in the Cold War, a period of hostility between Communist and non-Communist nations, and it received aid from both the United States and the Soviet Union.

Border disputes with Pakistan and other problems led to pressures that forced Daoud to resign in 1963. In 1964, under the leadership of Zahir Shah and Western-educated scholars and thinkers, Afghanistan adopted a

constitution that provided for a democratic government. But many problems arose. Zahir Shah and the legislature could not agree on the role of political parties within the reform program. Parliament often deadlocked on key issues. In addition, the Afghan people had little experience with, or understanding of, democratic government. As a result, the new democratic system failed to bring about the progress that the framers of the Constitution had hoped for.

In 1973, Daoud led a military revolt that overthrew Zahir Shah. Afghanistan's military, aided by Afghan Communists, took control of the government and established the Republic of Afghanistan with Daoud as president and prime minister.

**The Soviet invasion.** In 1978, rival left-wing military leaders and civilians in Afghanistan staged another revolt, during which Daoud was killed. This group, which received much financial and military aid from the Soviet Union, took control of the government and established policies that had some features of Communism.

Many in Afghanistan opposed the new government. They believed the government's policies conflicted with teachings of Islam. In addition, they resented Soviet influence on the government. Large numbers of Afghan people joined in a rebellion against the government shortly after it came to power. Widespread fighting broke out between the rebels, who called themselves *mujahideen* (holy warriors), and government forces.

The Soviet Union became concerned that the rebels might defeat the Afghan government forces. In 1979 and 1980, the Soviet Union sent thousands of troops to join the fight against the rebels. The Soviets had far better equipment than their opponents. But the rebels, supplied by countries opposed to the Soviet Union, used guerrilla tactics to overcome the Soviet advantage. The Soviets and Afghan government forces bombed many villages.

In 1988, the Soviet Union began withdrawing its troops from Afghanistan. The withdrawal was completed in February 1989. But the fighting between the mujahideen and government forces continued until 1992, when the rebels overthrew the government.

**Afghanistan under the Taliban.** After 1992, Afghanistan had several governments made up of various combinations of mujahideen groups. Continued fighting among the groups prevented the establishment of a stable government. In the mid-1990's, a new group, a conservative Islamic organization known as the Taliban, rose to power.

Soviet troops leave Afghanistan



Pashtun religious students who had fled to Pakistan during the Soviet invasion started the Taliban movement. The Taliban were supported by Pakistan's military and by militant Arab Islamic groups. By the late 1990's, the Taliban gained control of most of Afghanistan. They established a Council of Ministers to rule the country.

The Taliban imposed their strict interpretation of Islam on the nation. For example, they banned television and most other modern forms of entertainment, and they established rules for dress and grooming. All women were forced to cover themselves completely when in public, and men were required to grow beards. The Taliban also prohibited girls from attending school and forbade women from working outside the home.

The Taliban destroyed many artifacts of the country's heritage because they claimed they were anti-Islamic. For example, they



Afghan refugees

demolished two ancient statues of Buddha carved into a mountainside near Bamian, Afghanistan. The Taliban also destroyed many works of art in the country's museums.

Since the late 1970's, several million Afghans have fled to neighboring Pakistan and Iran to escape wars in Afghanistan. Thousands more Afghans have become refugees in their own country. Since 2002, more than 5 1/2 million have returned to their homes. Years of drought in the late 1990's and early 2000's left many Afghans in danger of starvation.

**Afghanistan War** is an international conflict that began in 2001. It started as a short but intense war in which the United States and its allies battled the Taliban, the militant Islamic group that controlled Afghanistan. The Afghanistan War followed the September 11 terrorist attacks, the worst acts of terrorism ever carried out against the United States. The initial phase of the war lasted from October to December of 2001. It resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the establishment of a new government in Afghanistan. The conflict persisted in the years that followed, however, as the United States and its allies struggled to establish stability in the country. The war became the longest ever deployment of American combat troops. (The Vietnam War was longer overall, but American combat troops only served there during the period from 1965 to 1975.)

On Sept. 11, 2001, terrorists used hijacked commercial jetliners to attack the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon Building near Washington, D.C. Nearly 3,000 people were killed. The U.S. government linked the attacks to al-Qa`ida (also spelled al-Qaeda), an Islamic extremist group that the Taliban had hosted in Afghanistan since 1996. The United States demanded that the Taliban arrest Qa`ida leaders and shut down their training camps. When the Taliban refused to do so, the United States and its allies launched a military campaign against the Taliban.

The campaign, called Operation Enduring Freedom, began on October 7 with a series of U.S. and British air strikes against Taliban positions. From October through December, the U.S. dropped about 12,000 bombs and missiles. The Northern Alliance and other Afghan anti-Taliban forces fought on the ground, with some assistance from U.S. and other allied forces. One Northern Alliance leader, Ahmad Shah Massoud (also spelled Ma`sud), had been assassinated by al-Qa`ida on September 9, giving the groups a strong reason to join the U.S.-led military effort.

The Afghan anti-Taliban forces took the city of Mazar-e Sharif on November 9. Wide-ranging attacks on Taliban-held towns and cities in the north began the next day. Herat fell on November 12, and Kabul fell on November 13. Taliban forces left Kandahar on December 7. The Afghan forces established their control of the city on December 9, bringing Taliban rule in Afghanistan to an end exactly nine weeks after the bombing began.

A conference of Afghan delegates chose Hamid Karzai, a prominent member of the Popalzai tribe, to head a six-month temporary administration. He was later elected president.

An international peacekeeping force began arriving in the country in late 2001. In 2006, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) took over peacekeeping and security duties for Afghanistan from the U.S.-led alliance. Conflict persisted as groups of Taliban and Qa`ida forces continued to fight U.S., Afghan, and allied troops, often from bases in Pakistan. Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, more than 3,200 coalition soldiers, mostly American, have died in Afghanistan.

On May 2 (May 1 in the United States), 2011, American military forces killed al-Qa`ida leader Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, a city northeast of Islamabad, Pakistan. Bin Laden was believed to have masterminded the September 11 terrorist attacks as well as a number of other attacks against U.S. targets.