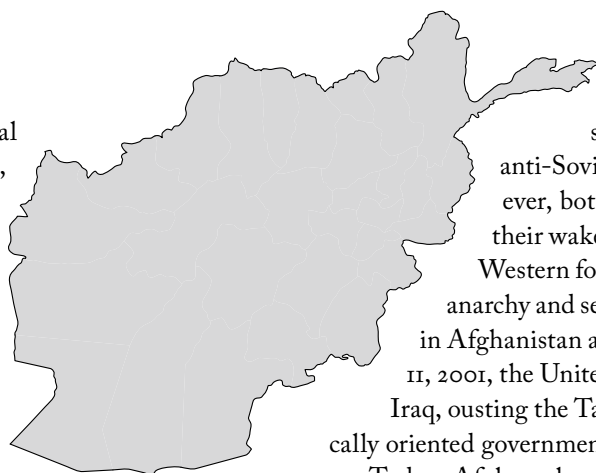


Afghanistan

Afghanistan is situated at a pivotal crossroads in Central Asia where, historically, three cultural areas have overlapped—Indian, Iranian, and Turkic. Over the centuries, traders and armies moving among these regions have deposited a population that make today's Afghanistan an ethnic patchwork of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and some dozen smaller minorities. The borders of the country were fixed in the nineteenth century by the British and Russians, who fought two wars (1838–1842 and 1878–1881) for control of the region. The buffer zone created between the expanding empires became Afghanistan. The British maintained control over Afghanistan's foreign policy until Afghanistan asserted its independence through the Anglo-Afghan War of 1919.



The relationship between Afghanistan and the United States dates back to the 1940s, and despite ups and downs, it will most likely endure in some form because of long-standing Western strategic interests in the region. In the twentieth century, Afghanistan served as a staging area for the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The superpowers' rivalry turned bloody after 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghani-

stan and the United States began aiding anti-Soviet guerillas. After the Cold War, however, both powers withdrew, leaving civil war in their wake. The Taliban, a radically Islamist, anti-Western force with links to Pakistan, exploited this anarchy and seized the country. After terrorists trained in Afghanistan attacked the United States on September 11, 2001, the United States displayed heavy involvement in Iraq, ousting the Taliban and replacing it with a democratically oriented government.

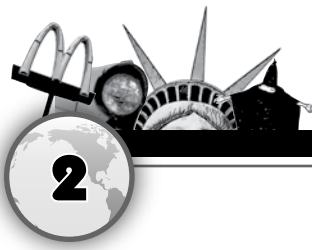
Today, Afghans have differing views of the United States, depending on their various local concerns. While some remain hostile to the U.S. presence, others look to the United States for help with reconstruction and security, and indeed expect more aid. The United States, in turn, has a continuing interest in Afghanistan as a base for its war on terrorism and eventually as a point of access to the oil resources of the Caspian basin.

History of Relations with the United States

In 1919, Afghanistan was a monarchy ruled by a Pashtun clan, the Mohammedzais. The attempted colonialization by the British

STATISTICAL SNAPSHOT OF AFGHANISTAN

Capital	Kabul	Languages	Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 50%, Pashtu (official) 35%, Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%, 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%, much bilingualism
Government type	Islamic republic	Religions	Sunni Muslim 80%, Shia Muslim 19%, other 1%
Area	647,500 sq km; slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Texas	GDP—purchasing power parity (PPP)	\$21.5 billion (2004 est.)
Population	31,056,997 (July 2006 est.)	GDP—per capita (PPP)	\$800 (2004 est.)
Population below poverty line	53% (2003)	Military expenditures—% of GDP	1.7% (2005 est.)
Infant mortality rate	male: 164.77 deaths/1,000 live births; female: 155.45 deaths/1,000 live births (2006 est.)	Oil consumption	5,000 bbl/day (2003 est.)
Life expectancy at birth	male: 43.16 years; female: 43.53 years (2006 est.)	Roadways	34,789 km
Unemployment rate	40% (2005 est.)		
Literacy	male: 51%; female: 21% (1999 est.)		
Internet users; % of population	25,000 (2005); 0.08%		



in the nineteenth and twentieth century left Afghans resentful of the British. However, this feeling did not carry over to the United States. In 1936, the royal government began sending Afghan students to U.S. universities, hoping to develop a technocratic class that would be competent to oversee the modernization of Afghanistan.

Cold War Competition in Afghanistan

Significant interaction between Afghanistan and the United States began in 1945, when the government under King Mohammad Zahir Shah (b. 1914, reigned 1933–1973) contracted Morrison-Knudson, a private U.S. construction firm, to build dams and irrigation works in the Helmand River Valley of the southwest.

In 1948, the United States and Afghanistan exchanged ambassadors. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) began posting various technical experts to help with the Helmand Valley project as part of America's Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. Both powers used development aid to draw nonaligned Afghanistan toward their camp. While the United States was building dams and canals in southwestern Afghanistan, the Soviets were funding highways and industrial projects in the north.

The Communist Takeover

The balancing act ended on 27 April 1978, when the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a hitherto outlawed Communist group, seized power in a bloody coup. The United States maintained relations with the new regime until 14 February 1979, when U.S. ambassador Adolph Dubs was kidnapped by a leftist

splinter group and slaughtered in the Afghan government's heavy-handed rescue attempt. Dubs was not replaced and the U.S. diplomatic staff in Kabul was reduced to a skeleton crew.

By this time, anti-Communist resistance was springing up throughout rural Afghanistan. To prevent a rebel victory, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on 24 December 1979 and installed a new puppet regime under Babrak Karmal (1929–1996) who served as a leader in one faction of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan.

U.S. Aid to the Mujahideen

In 1980 the United States began aiding groups of anti-Soviet guerrillas known collectively as Mujahideen. This aid was limited, at first, to a covert CIA program that supplied the rebels with about \$30 million a year in small arms. In 1985, however, under Congressional pressure spearheaded by Charlie Wilson, a representative from Texas, President Ronald Reagan shifted to a more aggressive policy. Due to matching funds from the Saudi Arabian government, covert aid to the Mujahideen rose to more than \$1 billion a year.

The turning point of the war came in August 1986, when the United States began delivering shoulder-mounted antiaircraft missiles called stingers to the Mujahideen. These enabled Afghan marksmen to bring down Soviet helicopter gunships. As a result, Soviet losses mounted, and in 1989 the Soviets withdrew their troops, leaving Afghanistan in the hands of the beleaguered Communist president, Mohammad Najibullah (1947–1996).

Afghanistan on Its Own

The United States closed its embassy in Kabul and ended aid to the Mujahideen once the Soviets withdrew. The Afghans began a four-year civil war. In 1992, the Mujahideen overtook Najibullah, and they bitterly fought one another. The international community took little notice of the war that leveled Afghan cities and resulted in the killing of thousands of civilians.

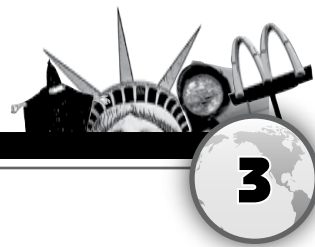
During the time that the civil war ravaged most of Afghanistan, the Islamist extremist group the Taliban began to take shape. Led by a reclusive one-eyed cleric, Mullah Mohammad Omar (b. 1962) of Kandahar, this new force was made up of young Pashtuns from the refugee camps in Pakistan. The Taliban conquered Kabul in 1996 and drove non-Pashtun Mujahideen north. The Tajik leader Ahmad Shah Massoud (1953–2001) forced non-Pashtuns into the Northern Alliance Coalition, which continued battling the Taliban.

The Taliban Era

The Taliban imposed an extreme, fundamentalist version of Sunni Islamic law in areas under their control. Their severe restrictions



U.S. Army Chinook helicopters over Afghanistan during the war to remove the Taliban from power. Source: istock/Yakov Munkebo.



on women's rights shocked the West, but Islamist activists from around the Arab world flocked to Afghanistan, seeing in it a new incarnation of seventh-century Mecca.

These Islamists used the Muslim concept of jihad ("holy struggle") to preach violence against the United States as a religious duty. They saw history as an apocalyptic struggle between God and Satan and preached that American social and sexual morals marked the United States as the representative of Satan in this struggle. The leading jihadist, the wealthy Saudi Arabian Osama bin Laden, founded the terrorist organization al-Qaeda and built training camps in Afghanistan under the aegis of the Taliban.

Fall of the Taliban

When the United States discovered that the September 11th terrorist attacks were caused by nineteen men linked to al-Qaeda, they responded with military force. On 7 October 2001 U.S. warplanes began bombing Taliban targets in Afghanistan. Massoud had been murdered by Arab suicide bombers on 9 September 2001, but the Northern Alliance emerged under new leadership to battle the Taliban. On 13 November 2001, the Taliban fled Kabul, but by 2005 there was a Taliban resurgence, especially in the south.

Post-Taliban Afghanistan

The following month, the United Nations convened a conference in Bonn, Germany. There, under close U.S. supervision, Afghan leaders created an emergency government headed by the Indian-educated Pashtun leader Hamid Karzai (b. 1957). Cabinet seats were apportioned among various factions. Zahir Shah, the former king, lent prestige to the proceedings as a figurehead. A number of Afghan refugees living in the West returned to accept seats in the new cabinet—men such as finance minister Ashraf Ghani who was working as a professor at Johns Hopkins University.

The new government took office on 5 December 2001. A Loya Jirga (Grand Tribal Assembly), closely managed by U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, ratified this government on 1 July 2002. Afghans went on to draft a new constitution with advice from U.S. legal scholars. The country began organizing elections, which were held in October 2004. The results confirmed Hamid Karzai in his office.

Perspectives on the United States

The global considerations that drive U.S. foreign policy, and distant conflicts such as that between Israel and Palestine, make little noise in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, attitudes toward the United States are shaped by U.S. impact on local issues. Nor do Afghans

PREAMBLE TO THE CONSTITUTION OF AFGHANISTAN

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan went on to draft a new constitution with advice from U.S. legal scholars. It was ratified on 4 January 2004.

We the people of Afghanistan:

1. With firm faith in God Almighty and relying on His lawful mercy, and Believing in the Sacred religion of Islam,
2. Realizing the injustice and shortcoming of the past, and the numerous troubles imposed on our country,
3. While acknowledging the sacrifices and the historic struggles, rightful Jihad and just resistance of all people of Afghanistan, and respecting the high position of the martyrs for the freedom of Afghanistan,
4. Understanding the fact that Afghanistan is a single and united country and belongs to all ethnicities residing in this country,
5. Observing the United Nations Charter and respecting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,
6. For consolidating national unity, safeguarding independence, national sovereignty, and territorial integrity of the country,
7. For establishing a government based on people's will and democracy,
8. For creation of a civil society free of oppression, atrocity, discrimination, and violence and based on the rule of law, social justice, protection of human rights, and dignity, and ensuring the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people,
9. For strengthening of political, social, economic, and defensive institutions of the country,
10. For ensuring a prosperous life, and sound environment for all those residing in this land,
11. And finally for regaining Afghanistan's deserving place in the international community,

Have adopted this constitution in compliance with historical, cultural, and social requirements of the era, through our elected representatives in the Loya Jirga dated 14 Jaddi 1382 in the city of Kabul.

Source: Afghanistan Online. (n.d.). Retrieved October 5, 2006, from http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current_constitution.html

have just one perspective, since they themselves are divided along ethnic, religious, and cultural lines.

Ethnic and Religious Factors

The Pashtuns of the tribal south had strong links with the Taliban. They felt shut out of post-Taliban negotiations and underrepresented in the government that emerged from Bonn. Kabul, therefore, has little clout in the tribal belt straddling the border with Pakistan



(Pashtuns live on both sides), and the United States is generally seen as an imperialist intruder. Ceaseless violence has forced the United States to keep more than ten thousand troops stationed in Afghanistan, and voter registration efforts in 2004 went slowly due to murders and bombings that cost some election workers their lives. In the end, however, Afghanistan managed to get almost all eligible voters registered for the 10 October 2004 election that confirmed Hamid Karzai as the country's president.

The Tajiks dominated the Northern Alliance, which fought the Taliban and benefited from the U.S. incursion into Afghanistan. Tajiks ended up with powerful positions in the first post-Taliban cabinet, but after the election, several leading Tajiks, including former defense minister Mohammed Fahim, found themselves excluded from the cabinet. Tajiks therefore remain wary of the United States, whom they see as having historically favored the Pashtuns. During the Soviet occupation, for example, the bulk of U.S. aid went to Pashtun leaders such as the radical fundamentalist Gulbuddin Hekmatyar (b. 1947).

Afghanistan's third-largest ethnoreligious group, the Hazaras of central Afghanistan, are a vulnerable Shiite minority surrounded by Sunnis. From the mid-1980s, they have looked to Shiite Iran for patronage and protection. Tension between the United States and Iran inevitably colors their perspective on the United States. The same dynamic holds in the western city of Herat and its environs, which are evolving into a quasi-autonomous state.

Urban Perspectives

Among the educated urban elite of Afghanistan, the United States accumulated great goodwill throughout the twentieth century. As early as the 1920s, Afghan intellectuals looked to the West as a model for social change, after the manner of the Young Turks, who transformed the Ottoman empire into secular Turkey. By the 1950s, Afghans educated in the West permeated the bureaucracy. They worked for the emancipation of women and the weakening of tribal feudalism.

Many Afghans of this thin class, however, were jailed or executed during the Communist era, and most others fled to the west. Returning from exile, these Westernized Afghans find themselves culturally at odds with their less-privileged countrymen, who had to survive the war years.

Rural Perspectives

Rural Afghans had little contact with Americans until the late 1960s. At that point, a heavy current of counterculture youngsters from Europe and the United States flowed through Afghanistan on their way to and from India. Their lifestyle shocked rural Afghans, who tend to be religious and conservative. In Kabul during this same era, bars, nightclubs, and Western fashions were proliferating.

The Mujahideen, who represented rural values, declared themselves at war, not just with Communism but with the Western lifestyle of license they associated with Kabul and ultimately the West. Once the Soviets were gone, therefore, leading Mujahideen such as Hekmatyar and Abdul Rasul Sayyaf directed their angry rhetoric at the United States.

Since the fall of the Taliban, anti-American attitudes have been muted somewhat by the ascendancy of conservatives in the Kabul government, a fragile regime that knows it needs U.S. military support for its survival. President Karzai's bodyguards, for example, are not Afghans but U.S. special forces.

Economic Factors

After the Karzai government took office, many ordinary Afghans took President Bush seriously when he spoke of a "Marshall Plan for Afghanistan." They looked forward to the restoration of Afghanistan in partnership with the United States.

Afghans frowned on the U.S. invasion of Iraq, largely because it seemingly signaled abandonment by the United States, a repetition of what happened after the Soviet withdrawal. The slow pace of reconstruction since then has stoked disappointment. In 2006 Kabul remained a ruined city teeming with homeless squatters. Impoverished refugees returning from Pakistan often find no jobs. In rural areas, land mines still litter fields and warlords have not disappeared although one of the most powerful autonomous regional powers, Ismail Khan of Herat, was absorbed into the Karzai cabinet a few months after the election. Women see little improvement in their status. People who had pinned high hopes on the United States now blame the United States for Afghanistan's difficulties.

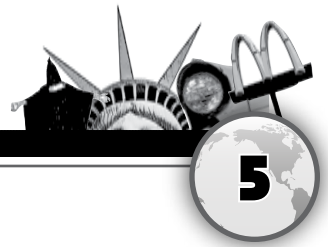
Mutual Interests

Despite these complications, Afghans in Kabul and points north see little alternative to a partnership with the United States. The United States, in turn, has a strong interest in a stable Afghanistan with a friendly government. Such a country is less likely to serve as a base for anti-American terrorism. Furthermore, the West will eventually need access to the petroleum reserves of the Caspian basin just north of Afghanistan. The shortest route for a pipeline from those oil fields to a warm water port on the Arabian Sea lies through Afghanistan. These considerations probably lock Afghanistan and the United States into a prickly symbiotic embrace for some time to come.

Tamim Ansary

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Algeria

See North Africa and Middle East