

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF AFGHANISTAN

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Afghanistan's main ethnic composition includes the Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baluchi, and Turkoman people. The Afghan nation is a very heterogeneous population, comprising at least 22 languages, of which Dari and Pashto are officially recognized in the constitution. Practically everyone in Afghanistan is Muslim representing both Sunni and Shia Muslims. The majority of Hazaras and Qizilbash are Shia, while the majority of Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Turkoman, and Baluchi people are Sunni. Until recent times, other religions were also represented in Afghanistan. In Kabul and in a few other urban cities, exclusive communities of Hindus, Sikhs, and Jews coexisted within the Muslim population. Like similar societies, Afghan traditions have been preserved because of the prevailing influence of religious customs and tribal culture. In Afghanistan, the Pashtuns are the last ethnic group still having an operational tribal system, known as Pashtunwali (Code of the Pashtuns). However, the Pashtuns are divided into hundreds of tribes and clans. Nonetheless, all Afghan ethnic groups have been able to preserve their kinship, village, and regional ties. The country has inherited a rich linguistic and cultural heritage dating back thousands of years. Afghanistan is a mountainous, arid and landlocked country often called the 'heart of Asia', sharing borders with Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and China. Not only has the geographic location of Afghanistan been important strategically, but it was also a highway for trade, raids, and military marches. Afghanistan emerged as a nation-state in the 18th century after centuries of invasions and conquests. It begins in 1973, when the army overthrew the monarchy led by Zahir Shah. He was forced into exile in Italy by his cousin and son-in-law, Daoud Khan, who declared himself president of the republic. Daoud Khan spoke about ending corruption and being true to the revolution but it became apparent the regime change was only a transfer of power. Resistance against the new regime formed immediately by Islamic guerrilla rebels. By 1975, the regime began purging from the government all officials with socialist or Marxist ties. After a series of socialist leader assassinations, Daoud Khan was overthrown by the same military that brought him to power. The coup brought to power two factions of a socialist organization in what would be described as the April Revolution. From April 1978 until December 1979, the Khalq (Masses) faction led by Nur Muhammad Taraki and Hafizullah Amin forced socialist reforms which incited the tribal and religious institutions to revolt. Various resistance groups united along one front called the mujahidin (holy strugglers) and declared a jihad (holy struggle) against the Afghan state. Fearing the fall of the pro-Soviet regime in Afghanistan, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. Returned from exile was Babrak Karmal, head of the Parcham (Banner) faction, who quickly announced general amnesty for political prisoners which included prominent mujahidin leaders and invited moderates to cooperate in the reconciliation. However, Karmal's measures were damaged by the brutal military operations of the Red Army and misuse of power by certain Afghan bureaucrats. In addition, the billions of covert military aid provided by the United States, Saudi Arabia and other countries to the

mujahidin escalated the war and reduced any chances for an Afghan reconciliation. In 1986, Dr. Muhammad Najibullah, head of the notorious secret service, replaced Karmal. After a decade, the Soviet army withdrew, leaving the state split among many ethnic factions. In 1992, the mujahidin takeover of the state ignited into a civil war between mujahidin warlords, and later between the warlords and the Taliban. In the 1990s the Taliban assumed control and introduced strict adherence to Islamic law. Between 1992 and 2001, Afghanistan became the site for the worst battles, ethnic genocide, pillage, famine, and misery since Genghis Khan had swept through the region centuries earlier.

The terrorist group, Al Qaeda, led by Osama bin Laden, had also built training camps in Afghanistan. While most of the world condemned the Taliban, they were officially recognized by three countries: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. After September 11, 2001, the Taliban refused to hand over Bin Laden, leading to a U.S. led coalition military campaign. By November, 2001, the Taliban lost control of Kabul. A new government, the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan was established in December 2001. Assisted by the international community, the Afghan state is trying to rebuild the war-torn nation, as well as establish economic and political stability. Despite its efforts, the Afghan government faces the same obstacles as faced by the government during the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. While President Hamid Karzai and prominent members of his cabinet and the elected parliament call for reconciliation and ceasefires with the Taliban; internal discord in the government, misuse of donor aid, bribery and corruption of state officials, the drug trade, promotion of warlords, the inability to control the untamed military campaigns of foreign troops such as collateral damage, the inability to understand the culture and customs of Afghans, and support for the Taliban resistance across the border in Pakistan has stymied any hopes for democratization and peaceful reform.