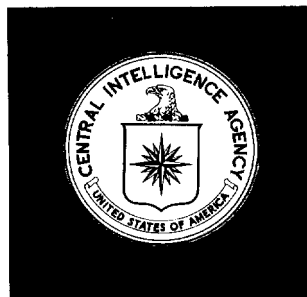




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Afghanistan Handbook

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No. 87

No. 0639

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INTRODUCTION

Afghanistan is a fiercely independent, underdeveloped nation, which is still fairly isolated from the rest of the world. Despite basic conservatism and Islamic and tribal traditionalism, the government is slowly modernizing the economy and political and social institutions. In foreign policy, Kabul has usually taken a neutral position. This does not prevent the government, however, from attempting to play the great powers, including its huge neighbor to the north, against each other.

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GEOGRAPHY

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I. GEOGRAPHY

Afghanistan, a landlocked country, is bordered on the north by the USSR, on the west by Iran, on the south and east by Pakistan, and has a short border in the northeast with China. Its area is about 250,000 square miles with a maximum northeast-southwest extent of about 950 miles and a maximum northwest-southeast extent of about 500 miles. About 70% of the area consists of rugged mountains (the most important of which are the Hindu Kush) and hills. Both north and southwest are arid plains. Afghanistan has hot dry summers and moderate, less dry winters. Annual precipitation is less than 15 inches in most of the country.

There are several significant—but so far largely unexploited—deposits of iron ore, plentiful coal deposits, and natural gas deposits estimated at nearly 300 billion cubic meters.

Estimates vary by as much as two or three million, but the government estimates the population at about 17 million. Density is heaviest in the northeast and along the northern border. The major ethnic groups are Caucasian Pushtuns (up to 50% of the population) and Tajiks (25%), the Mongoloid Hazaras (9%) and the mixed Uzbeks (9%). About 87% of the population are Sunni Muslims and 12% Shia Muslims. The remainder of the population belongs to smaller branches of Islam, or are Sikhs, Hindus, Christians or Jews.

Pushtun is spoken as a native tongue by about half of the population (primarily Pathans) and Dari, a dialect of Persian by about 35%, including the Tajiks and Uzbeks.

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ECONOMIC
BACKGROUND

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II. ECONOMIC BACKGROUND

Economic growth in the past decade has been about 2% annually, roughly the same as the population growth. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1970 was about \$1 billion, or below \$100 per capita.

Agriculture and nomadic herding provide the livelihood for about 80% of the population and account for about half the GDP. Modern industry contributes only two to three percent.

Afghanistan has 1,400 miles of modern highways, but parts of the country have virtually no roads, and all but the main highways are primitive. The only important navigable waterway is the Amu Darya on the northern border. Both airlines—Ariana Afghan Airlines, an international carrier, and Bakhtar Airlines, a domestic service, that is considered unsafe by US officials—are government owned, as are the country's underdeveloped telecommunications systems. There is no rail system.

Over-all economic policy is carried out through a series of five-year plans, the fourth of which was to begin in March 1972 with projected expenditures of over \$300 million for development. The plans have been directed almost exclusively at the public sector. The USSR has been the largest contributor.

Afghanistan usually exports only about two thirds as much as it imports. More than half its imports in the past decade have been financed through foreign aid. The USSR is its major trading partner, but India, the UK, US, West Germany, and Japan are also important. Major exports are fruits and nuts, Karakul skins, and natural gas. Afghanistan's opium production—all illegal—was about 100 tons in 1971.

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POLITICAL
SITUATION
AND TRENDS

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III. POLITICAL SITUATION AND TRENDS

Despite both British and Russian attempts to extend their influence, Afghanistan has maintained its independence since 1747. The Mohammadzai Dynasty has ruled the country since 1818. The branch now reigning came to power in 1929. Although Zahir Shah became king in 1933, the country was actually governed by his uncles until 1953 and then by his cousin, Mohammad Daud, from 1953 to 1963. In 1963, the King dismissed Daud and began an "experiment in democracy."

Under the 1964 constitution, the King has extensive powers, and although he prefers to remain aloof from everyday affairs, he is the dominant figure in the government. The prime minister appointed by the King and the cabinet administer the day-to-day operations of the government.

The efficiency of the various ministries is seriously impaired by widespread inefficiency, overcentralization of decision making, inter- and intra-ministerial disputes, and the limited education of most civil servants.

Significant progress has been made toward implementing the constitutional provisions for a multi-tiered court system headed by a supreme court with both judicial and administrative responsibilities. The Afghan judicial system, however, is still susceptible to bribery and political pressure. The legal code is based on the Sharia law derived from the Koran, with some infusion of Western legal concepts.

The Parliament (Shura) is bicameral. The lower house (Wolesi Jirga—People's Council) consists of 216 members elected for four-year terms. It is the more powerful branch of the legislature, with powers to remove the cabinet. In case of disagreements with the upper house over legislation, its bills take precedence. The lower house has grown increasingly important in Afghan politics, although it is still hampered by lack of experience, the absence of internal political organization, and a quorum requirement of two thirds of the membership that often delays sessions.

The upper house (Meshrano Jirga—Council of Elders) will consist of 84 members, a third appointed by the king for five-year terms, a third directly elected for four-year terms, and a third to be elected by provincial councils—which have not yet been established—for three-year terms.

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The Grand Assembly (Loya Jirga), which has the power to amend the constitution and has traditionally approved the most important policy decisions, is viewed by some as the ultimate political power in Afghanistan, but it meets only rarely—the last time in 1964, to approve the constitution. It is composed of members of both houses of parliament. When the provincial councils are established, their chairmen will also be included.

Afghanistan's 28 provinces (waliyats) are ruled by governors (walis) appointed by the King. The provincial councils will perform as local legislatures when they are formed.

The policies of the government are influenced by the tribes, which want a minimum of central government interference in their affairs; and to a lesser extent by leftist students and ultra-conservative religious leaders. The support of the military, of course, is essential for the monarchy's survival. Each ethnic group usually shows some degree of unity on issues that directly affect its interests; for example, Dari speakers have opposed measures designed to enhance the status of Pushtun. On the whole, there are no well organized pressure groups which have tried to move the government toward any particular policy. Although no official political parties exist, informal political groupings—most of them student-based—are becoming more active.

All Afghans 20 and older, except the military and security forces and members of the Supreme Court are eligible to vote. Turnout in elections has been light, and malpractices have been widespread.

The National Police (about 11,000 men) and the paramilitary Royal Gendarmerie (14,200)—both subordinate to the Ministry of Interior—are officially responsible for law and order. Despite corruption and lack of training and equipment, they have usually been able to cope with disorders. Nevertheless, internal security ultimately depends on the military (see Section VI).

The principal civilian intelligence organization, the Department of National Protection, reports directly to the Prime Minister, and is concerned primarily with domestic subversion.

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SUBVERSION

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IV. SUBVERSION

The hard core membership of Afghan Communist groups numbers only a few hundred, and is divided into several competing organizations. The two most important—Parcham and Khalq—are pro-Soviet; several smaller groups lean toward the Chinese. Although Moscow and Peking probably give some help to local Communists, current Soviet policy objectives preclude encouraging anti-government activity, and Peking's influence is minimal. Much of the Communist following comes from students.

There are a number of potentially subversive non-Communist groups. Although former Prime Minister Daud still entertains hopes of returning to power, he probably lacks the following to be a serious threat to the government. Conservative religious leaders have on occasion caused considerable civil disorder in their efforts to prevent modernization, but their influence is declining. The military is loyal to the monarchy.

The Pathan tribes have played a major role in Afghan politics and could pose a serious threat to the government. There appears to be no issue likely to unite the tribes against the monarchy, and if such an issue should appear, the government—itsself dominated by Pathans—would be more likely to accommodate the tribes than oppose them. In the past, Pakistan has directed a good deal of propaganda at the tribes, but it was primarily trying to discourage their involvement in Pakistan's Pathan areas. India's clandestine contacts with tribal leaders have been directed against Pakistan not Afghanistan.

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LEADING
PERSONALITIES

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V. LEADING PERSONALITIES

Mohammad Zahir, King of Afghanistan: Zahir, born in 1914, became king in 1933 when his father was assassinated. In 1963, Zahir, hoping to avoid the upheavals that have occurred in other developing nations, began his experiment in democracy. Although considerable power has been given to parliament and the prime ministers, the King continues to dominate the government and makes all important decisions.

Ahmed Shah, Crown Prince: Many Afghans consider Ahmed Shah, born in 1934, as incompetent, and even though he is being groomed to succeed his father, he could be replaced by one of his brothers or become the figurehead for a group of politicians or soldiers.

Brigadier Abdul Wali Khan, Commander Central Forces Corps: Prince Abdul Wali, the King's cousin and son-in-law, may be the second most important person in the country. Born about 1925, he has strong support in the military, is close to the King, and when the King dies could well become the real ruler of Afghanistan.

Abdul Zahir, Prime Minister: Dr. Zahir, who became prime minister in 1971, at first gave promise of reducing the animosity between parliament and the executive. He has encountered major difficulties with the lower house, however, and has been unable or unwilling to deal with the entrenched incompetence and corruption in the government. He will probably be replaced before the end of the year.

Mohammad Musa Shafiq, Foreign Minister: Shafiq, reportedly a highly intelligent and ambitious man, is expected to succeed Prime Minister Zahir. In September 1972 he took over most functions of that office. As foreign minister, Shafiq has attempted to make Afghanistan's foreign policy more activist, without changing its basic neutralism.

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ARMED FORCES

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VI. ARMED FORCES

The Afghan armed forces would be unable to halt a full-scale invasion by any of the country's neighbors, but, barring a well organized tribal rebellion (which would test army loyalties in any case), they are capable of maintaining order domestically. Although the Afghans have received large amounts of Soviet materiel, they do not have the capability to use the equipment effectively.

The army's 68,700 men are organized into three corps with some independent divisions. There are 10 infantry divisions, three armored divisions, and several independent brigades. (Afghan units are considerably smaller than those of neighboring countries; for example, an Afghan division is roughly equivalent to a Pakistani brigade.)

The Air Defense Force of 8,100 men (including 5,300 army personnel not counted above) consists of army radar and anti-aircraft units and the Royal Afghan Air Force. The air force has over 230 aircraft, including SU-7 and MIG-21 jet fighters and IL-28 light bombers. Poor maintenance of equipment and a lack of training severely limit the effectiveness of the air force.

The bulk of the army is stationed near the Pakistan border, because Pakistan is seen as the major military threat and also because most of the potentially dissident tribes live in this area.

The military budget—excluding funds for the gendarmerie—for the fiscal year ending 21 March 1971 was almost \$29 million, or nearly 20% of the total budget and 2.9% of the GNP.

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FOREIGN
RELATIONS

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VII. FOREIGN RELATIONS

The Soviet Union supplies almost all of Afghanistan's military aid and is the largest source of economic aid—about \$700 million so far. It is also Afghanistan's major trading partner. As a result, Afghanistan has been careful to avoid positions and actions that would offend Moscow. The USSR appears content to follow a policy designed to deny any third country great influence in Afghanistan. There is no evidence that the Soviets are attempting either to dictate policies to Kabul or to establish a Communist government there.

The Afghans have consistently tried to offset the influence of one great power with that of others. Most Afghans see the US as a counterweight to the USSR. The Afghans have long had close relations with Germany, and the West Germans have more influence in Afghanistan than in most Asian countries.

Although they share a common border, Afghanistan had few contacts with China until the mid-1960s. In a move to offset Soviet influence, however, the Chinese have since extended grants and credits totaling \$72 million.

Afghanistan's most serious foreign policy dispute has been with Pakistan over Pushtunistan, the area of Pakistan inhabited by the Pathans which is sometimes extended to include Baluchi areas as well. Over the years, Afghan demands have ranged from outright independence for these areas to greater autonomy for them within Pakistan—the government's current position. In the early 1960s, the issue led to very tense relations between the two countries, but since then the Afghans appear to have recognized that they are incapable of putting much pressure on Islamabad. Not only is Afghanistan militarily no match for Pakistan, but a substantial part of Afghanistan's foreign trade must pass through Pakistan.

Afghanistan and Iran have had difficulties over the distribution of the waters of the Helmand and other rivers shared by the two countries. After years of sporadic negotiation, the issue now appears to be approaching settlement.

The Afghans have viewed India as a counterweight to Pakistan and took no active part in any of the Indo-Pakistani wars. In the wake of the Indian victory in December 1971, however, some Afghans are beginning to think of India more as a potential threat than a protector.

Afghanistan has consistently backed the Arabs against Israel, but on most questions the main objective of its foreign policy has been to offend neither its neighbors nor the great powers.

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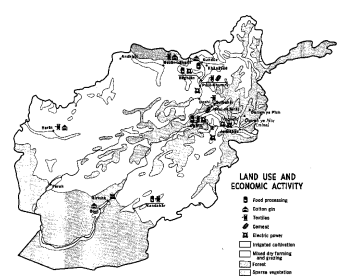
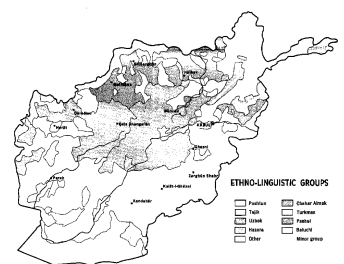
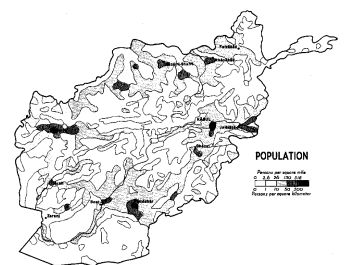
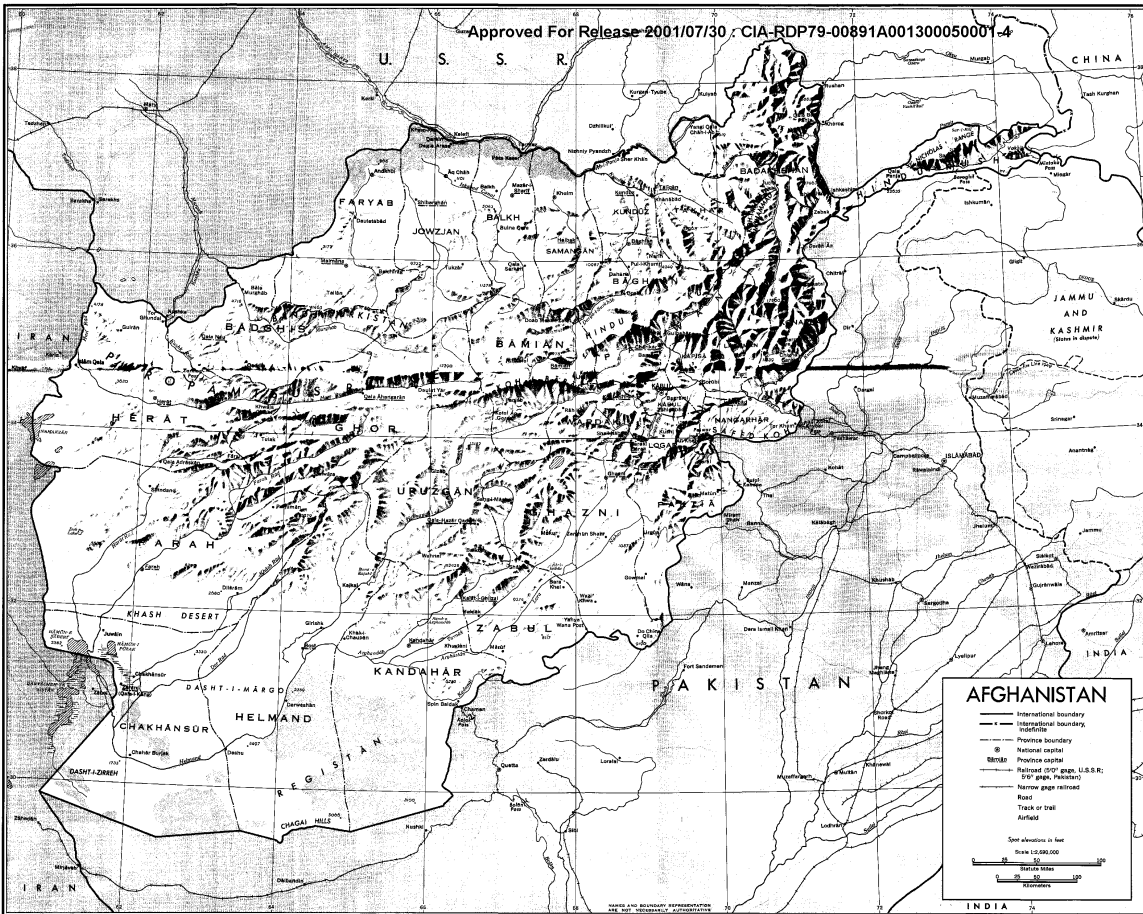
VIII. US INTERESTS

Afghanistan is interested in good relations with the US, primarily as a means of offsetting Soviet influence in Afghanistan.

The US has no defense commitment to Afghanistan, but does train about 20 Afghan military men in the US every year. The US is the second largest aid donor to Afghanistan—after the USSR—having supplied a total of over \$400 million in loans and grants since 1959. US business investments are about \$350,000 or 5% of foreign investment in the country. The value of annual Afghan exports to the US varies widely, sometimes amounting to over \$10 million. Imports from the US generally run a little more than \$10 million.

Afghanistan

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