Cultural Quick Guide: Afghanistan

This guide is intended to help volunteers prepare for their experience with the Idaho Office for Refugees (IOR). Learning about a refugee’s nation of origin, their culture, and their historic background is central to understanding who they are. Additionally, tips for teaching English and interacting socially will improve communication and the chances of a successful experience for both you and the refugee. It takes many human-service professionals as well as volunteers from the community to participate in refugee resettlement. Thank you for helping to welcome refugees to our community.

Where Is Afghanistan?

Afghanistan is located in south-central Asia and is a high, landlocked country. Afghanistan is a little smaller than the state of Texas. Afghanistan shares borders with Iran on the west; Pakistan on the east and south; and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan on the north. The geography of Afghanistan is mostly mountainous, with plains in the north and southwest.

![Figure 1. Map of Afghanistan](image)

Climate

The climate is arid, with hot summers and bitterly cold winters (similar to the climate of Wyoming). Temperatures vary by altitude, but generally the average highs are above 90° F in the summers, and the winter lows drop well below freezing. In general, the Afghan climate is fairly similar to what we experience here in Boise.
What was their journey?

Life in Afghanistan

Afghans are an independent people with a rich cultural heritage. There are several ethnic groups in Afghanistan, which include the Pashtun, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen, Nuristanis, Aimaqs, and others. The Pashtuns are the dominant ethnic group. Most Afghans are farmers or small herdsmen.

Afghans tend to dress modestly. Traditional male Afghani clothing usually includes a long tunic over baggy trousers, a pakol (hat), a lungee (turban), and a chapan (coat). Pashtuns leave a couple of feet of turban cloth hanging down, while most of those in the rest of the country tuck the end in.

Figure 2. Traditional Afghani Male Dress [1]

Traditional dress for Afghani women includes two-piece outfits made up of loose trousers worn under a tunic with a high neck and long sleeves. Many women complete the outfit with a long scarf, called the hijab, which covers the head when modesty is required, but is at other times gracefully draped across the shoulders. The hijab allows women of the Islamic faith to observe the standards of modesty, which are connected to matters of public decency [2].

Figure 3. Traditional Afghani Female Dress [3]

In the United States, Afghans typically adopt Western clothing styles. However, in the summer they might wear their native dress, as it is better suited to hot weather than Western clothes are.

The most common languages spoken in Afghanistan are Dari and Pashto, which are the country’s official languages. It is common for people to be bilingual.

People’s names in Afghanistan differ from the first-name and last-name combination that is common in the United States. In fact, many Afghans do not have a last name, or surname, when they arrive in the United States. Many people confuse the double first names of Afghans, such as Abdul Haq, with a first name and last name; but these names are actually like the American names Bobbie Sue or Billy Bob. Typically, Afghans choose surnames from ethnic or family roots. Often, they will adopt the name of their tribe as their last name.

As a result of three decades of war, Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy levels in Asia, with a 28% literacy rate [4]. In 1969, the government instituted free and mandatory education for children between the ages of seven and fifteen. However, the country only had this system for ten years before Russian invasion. According to cultural orientation.net, only one-third of school age children in Afghanistan ever attended school in the 1980’s [5].
Despite the challenges, it was possible for a child to get a substantial education. A family with the resources to do so could send their children (both male and female) to secondary schools in urban areas and the university in Kabul. In fact, Afghan refugees tend to have a higher level of education than Southeast Asian and African refugee groups. Most of the highly educated people in Afghanistan have fled the country. According to Aamir’s (pseudonym to protect anonymity) experience, this is because educated people tend to be jailed or executed quickly by the invading regime in order to curb resistance.

Afghan people are predominantly Muslim (99%). There are two branches of the Muslim faith, Sunni and Shi’ia. The majority of Afghan Muslims are Sunni (between 74-80%), with the rest practicing the Shi’a faith (between 19-25%). According to the Afghanistan Cultural Profiles Project, “One of the main distinctions between Sunni and Shi’ite faiths is that Shi’ites follow a religious leader called an imam, who is regarded as Mohammed’s successor and an intermediary between Allah and the faithful [6].” There are two Mosques in Boise, the Imam Almahdi Islamic Center (Shi’a), located at 308 N Phillippi St., and the Islamic Center of Boise (Shi’a and Sunni), located at 328 N. Orchard.

For Afghans, family is a matter of great privacy. The average Afghan family contains between three and four children. The father is considered the head of the family, and makes the majority of the family decisions. Afghans tend to socialize almost solely with extended family members, which can cause some culture conflict if they are living in the United States, as family obligations often overrule an individual Afghan’s other responsibilities (example: job, school, one’s own needs, etc.). According to feedback from one Afghan refugee, marriages are typically arranged (97%), but depending on the views of the family, the potential bride or groom may be allowed to choose their mate (3%).

Conflict

Beginning in December of 1979, Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet military. The Soviet occupation of Afghanistan resulted in the murder of approximately 600,000 to 2 million Afghan civilians. This led to over 5 million Afghans fleeing to other parts of the world. The Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989.

After the Soviet withdrawal, the fighting continued with many civil wars, resulting in the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996. Taliban rule became infamous for their repression of women as well as their destruction of the country's cultural heritage. After Al-Qaeda’s 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States and its allies began military operations and quickly overthrew the Taliban.

Most recently (2008), many Afghans have been driven from their homes in search of food and work, due to severe drought and food shortages.

Of the refugees settling in America, most, if not all, have suffered tragic losses. Homes have been destroyed or occupied by militias, family members and friends have been injured, kidnapped or killed, and the Afghan way of life has been radically altered. Although resettling in America is a safe alternative to life in Afghanistan, refugees live in constant memory of their homeland and the people they love who are fighting for survival.

Life in Refugee Camps

On average, refugees spend about four years in refugee camps, although there are people who have spent decades in refugee camps. Many refugee camps consist of tent cities, while older camps, such as Jalozai, contain more permanent structures like mud-brick homes. Some camps are fortunate enough to have established schools, while others do not.
There are many refugees who do not spend time in refugee camps. For example, Aamir did not spend any time in refugee camps and knows many other refugees who came to America by way of other countries, such as Pakistan, India, and Russia. These people did not live in camps, but were given ID cards by the United Nations High Council for Refugees (UNHCR) which allowed them to live in the country until UNHCR determined if they would be able to immigrate to America. These individuals lived in houses, apartments, or whatever housing they were able to afford. Aamir himself worked for the U.S. government in Afghanistan, so he was issued a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV), which allowed him to emigrate directly to the U.S.

**Life in Boise**

Boise has become a popular relocation destination for refugees due to its size and access to refugee resources. Boise is small enough that refugees can walk or ride bikes to get around town; and it has a public transportation system. Also, Boise's size doesn't overwhelm refugees as a larger city might.

Boise has a strong network of non-profit agencies set up to accommodate refugees. These agencies provide refugees with English language tutoring, job placement assistance, and health and social services. On the other hand, Boise has its challenges. There are few speakers of refugees' native languages. Refugees' low English levels typically limit their employment options to the service industry. The time restrictions caused by bus schedules can also be a problem for refugees.

**Meet Refugees for Community Activities**

According to past volunteers, every activity is a learning opportunity for refugees. A good first step may be sharing a meal in the refugee's home to get acquainted with the family and help them practice speaking English. Once refugees feel comfortable, outings in town provide first-hand experiences with American culture.

In addition to the activities suggested below, refugees might have specific errands in mind. Volunteers are encouraged to plan activities within walking distance or take public transportation instead of using their own vehicles.

- The Kabul market specializes in foods from Afghanistan, India, and the Middle East. Take the family there if they wish to purchase Afghan foods.
- Afghans enjoy soccer. Take them to see some of Boise's intramural soccer games, and show them how to sign up if they are interested. (Boise Capital Soccer Club [http://www.boisecapitals.com/frameset.php](http://www.boisecapitals.com/frameset.php))
- Afghan poetry is the most popular art form in Afghan society. Go to the public library with refugees to read Afghan poetry. If the refugees are comfortable doing so, ask them to read a poem to you and explain what it is about. While at the library, show them how to get a library card and check out books.
- Kite flying is very popular in Afghanistan. If the wind is right, take Afghan refugees to a local park to fly kites.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did you know?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Some Afghan men fly &quot;fighter kites&quot; in competitions. Made with tissue paper and bamboo and painted with elaborate designs, the kits may have wing spans of 1.5 meters. Kite-flying line (called tar) is coated with glass and usually homemade. Flyers attempt to cut down each other’s kites.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Afghanistan Cultural Profiles Project*
Was it something I said?

Just as there are important things to teach refugees about American culture, there are things you need to be aware of when it comes to Afghan culture. This will help to avoid misunderstandings or offending refugees. If you are unsure if something will offend refugees you are interacting with, ask them.

When communicating, Afghans tend to use a lot of gestures and movement to express themselves. Members of the same sex also tend to touch one another frequently while talking. However, touching someone of the opposite sex while in public is considered inappropriate in Muslim society. Afghan women typically lower their eyes when speaking to a man to show respect. Also, it considered highly inappropriate for a man to express interest of any sort in another man's female relatives.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>When greeting friends and acquaintances, Afghan men are very affectionate: shaking both hands, hugging and kissing on the cheeks are all common gestures. Male friends also may also hold hands or link arms when walking.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Afghanistan Cultural Profiles Project

According to Karima (pseudonym to protect anonymity), there are other important social items to be aware of.

- Never touch a Quran (Muslim bible), unless invited to. Be respectful of all holy books and places.
- To avoid offending Afghans, you should dress modestly. For example, never wear shorts, even when exercising.
- Remove your shoes before entering a home or a mosque.

The tables below show useful phrases in Dari and Pashto, the main languages of Afghanistan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Dari</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
<td>Salam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good morning</td>
<td>Sabh bakhair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Lutfan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Hasebki or Tasha kur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Baleh or Bale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Neh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you?</td>
<td>Chehtur hastain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<th>English</th>
<th>Pashto</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hello</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good morning</td>
<td>As-salam aleikum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please</td>
<td>Lutfan or Pa-mehrhabaney-sara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Ma-na-na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Ho</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>Na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How are you?</td>
<td>Tha tsanga ye?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My name is...</td>
<td>Ze-ma (my) num...dai (is)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you speak English?</td>
<td>Sa (Aya) ta pe...po-he-gy Englesi?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Where can I learn more?

For more specific information on Afghan refugees, use the resources and references listed below.

**Resources**

- Documentary: 16 Days in Afghanistan. This film covers the journey of its director, Afghan-American Anwar Hajher, to Afghanistan after 25 years. The film focuses on Afghan culture and all aspects of life since the fall of the Taliban.
- The Kite Runner by Khaled Hosseini. Although this book is fiction, it presents an accurate portrait of life in Afghanistan. You will find more information on “kite fighting” contests and “kite running” explained in this book. There is also a movie by the same name based on the book.

**References**

Available: [http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Asia/Afghanistan.htm](http://www.trekearth.com/gallery/Asia/Afghanistan.htm)

Available: [http://islam.about.com/od/dress/p/clothing_reqs.htm](http://islam.about.com/od/dress/p/clothing_reqs.htm)


Available: [http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.htm#people](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5380.htm#people)

Available: [http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/atoc.html](http://www.cal.org/co/afghan/atoc.html)


[7] @ Culture: Gateway To Virtual Afghanistan [Online].