

## Afghanistan. A brief overview

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Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country whose importance lies in its strategic position at the crossroads of Central Asia. It borders Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan and its complex networks of trade and cultural links has made it an irresistible prize for centuries.



From Alexander the Great in the third century BC to the Soviet army almost two and a half thousand years later, Afghanistan has been occupied and fought over by armies from all corners of the world. Its people are an eclectic mix of races and religions whose adaptations to the harsh mountain environment have given the country robust agricultural systems and intricate methods of water management.

The Hindu Kush mountain range, the western extremity of the Himalaya, runs across the country from east to west. The average elevation of the interior is 2700m and the highest peaks reach 7500m in the northeast.

From here rise the major rivers of Afghanistan. The Kabul river flows east into the Indus while most others such as the Helmand, Farah and Harirud disappear into the desert sands. To the north of the Hindu Kush are the low lying plains of Afghan Turkistan and the border marked by the Amu Dariya (Oxus) River. To the south stretches the dry, dusty Dasht-i-Margo, or Desert of Death.

Afghanistan was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1979 and the USSR was forced to withdraw 10 years later. Fighting continued among the various Mujahidin factions until 1996 when the Taliban movement took power and seized most of the country. The defeat of the Taliban in 2001 paved the way for a democratic governing system.

### Geography

**Location:** southern Asia, north and west of Pakistan, east of Iran.

**Area:** 652,000 sq km

**Borders:** China, 76km; Tajikistan, 1,206 km; Iran, 936km; Pakistan, 2,430 km; Turkmenistan, 744km; Uzbekistan, 137km.

**Climate:** arid to semiarid; cold winters and hot summers

**Terrain:** mostly rugged mountains; plains in north and southwest

**Elevation:** lowest point - Amu Darya 258m; highest point - Nowshak 7,485m