

Reaching the Nations International Church Growth Almanac

Country reports on the LDS Church around the world from a landmark almanac. Includes detailedanalysis of history, context, culture, needs, challenges and opportunities for church growth.



Afghanistan

Population: 31.82 millions (#41 out of countries)

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Geography

Area: 652,230 square km. Landlocked in Southern Asia, Afghanistan borders Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. The rugged Hindu Kush Mountains extend throughout much of the country and reach into Pakistan and Tajikistan to the east. Mountains and desert plains dominate most the terrain. Climate ranges from arid to semi-arid with cold winters and hot summers. Earthquakes, flooding, and droughts are natural hazards. Environmental issues include limited fresh water, soil degradation, overgrazing, deforestation, desertification, and pollution. Afghanistan is divided into thirty-four administrative provinces.

Peoples

Pashtun: 42%

Tajik: 27%

Hazara: 9%

Uzbek: 9%

Aimak: 4%

Turkmen: 3%

Baloch: 2%

Other: 4%

Population: 34,124,811 (July 2017)

Annual Growth Rate: 2.36% (2017)

Fertility Rate: 5.12 children born per woman (2017)

Life Expectancy: 50.3 male, 53.2 female (2017)

Languages: Afghan Persian/Dari (21.9%), Pashto (22.2%), Uzbek (8.4%), Hazaragi (5.1%), Turkmen (4.3%), Aimaq (1.4%), other or unspecified (36.7%). Dari and Pashto are the official languages. Dari is spoken by as much as 80% of the population, whereas Pashto is spoken by 47% of the population. Common regional languages are understood by some, including Arabic and Urdu. Languages with over one million native speakers (L1 users) include Dari (7.6 million), Pashto dialects (7.7 million), Uzbek (2.9 million), Hazaragi (1.8 million), and Turkmen (1.5 million).

Literacy: 38.2% (2015)

History

The area of modern-day Afghanistan has experienced one of the longest known conflict-ridden histories due to its location at the crossroads of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and Central Asia. For millennia, the strongest foreign military forces have experienced only limited success in subduing the indigenous population, with the exception of the Mongols under Genghis Khan. Alexander the Great invaded the region in 328 BC and founded the Hellenistic state of Bactria. Prior to the Arab invasion in 642 AD, the Scythians, White Huns, and Turks successively controlled the region for centuries. Arabs introduced Islam and maintained control until Persian rule, which was followed by the Turkic Ghaznavids by the eleventh century. The Mongols left a strong legacy after a powerful invasion of the region. In the mid-eighteenth century, Ahmad Shah Durrani founded the modern Afghan nation state by unifying Pashtun tribes. In the nineteenth century, the Russian and British Empires vied for control of Afghanistan from bordering territories. Afghans defeated the British army in 1839 and maintained autonomy in many areas of the country and government despite British control of foreign affairs from 1880 to 1919. Britain and Russia established Afghanistan's modern boundaries during this period. Afghans regained total control over the country and government in 1919 as Britain withdrew and signed the Treaty of Rawalpindi. King Amanullah ruled until 1929 and attempted to modernize Afghanistan and end its traditional isolationist stance. The king relinquished his power as a result of growing opposition to his reforms.

Muhammed Zahir Shah ruled from 1933 to 1973, during which time Afghanistan was a relatively stable secular state. A liberal constitution and democratic reforms introduced in 1964 allowed the proliferation of extremist parties. The monarchy was overthrown in 1973, and a republic was proclaimed; the republic was then overthrown in 1978, and a Marxist state was imposed. Political instability plagued the country for much of the remainder of the twentieth century as extremist groups fought for control of the government. The Soviet Union sent troops to support the Marxist government in 1979 but failed to establish a self-sustaining communist regime, ultimately withdrawing in 1989. The Taliban filled the power vacuum left by departing Soviet forces and engaged in ongoing fighting with the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Massoud until Massoud was assassinated by Al-Qaeda assassins on September 9, 2001, two days before the September 11th attacks in the United States. The Taliban enforced an extreme interpretation of Islam that severely infringed on human rights and supported terrorists including Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the September 11th terrorist attacks. The United States formed an anti-terrorist coalition that invaded Afghanistan in October 2001 and captured Kabul the following month with the assistance of the Northern Alliance. The United Nations has assisted in the formation of a democratic government in the 2000s, which held elections in 2004.

Afghanistan has experienced marked economic development, but standards of living rank among the lowest worldwide. Corruption is a major challenge that has limited economic development and political stability. Lawlessness in many rural areas continues to challenge efforts by the newly instated democratic government and U.S. coalition forces to secure Afghanistan's borders, subdue pro-Taliban fighters, and rebuild the country after decades of internal conflict and foreign invasions.[1] Although there have been improvements stabilizing the government in the 2010s, the Taliban remain a potent force in nearly every province even though multiple top Taliban leaders have been killed. The Taliban refuse to negotiate a peace settlement with the government until foreign military forces leave the country.

Culture

Islam and tribalism strongly influence daily life and local customs and practices. Afghans continue to struggle with the role of Islam in government although most believe Muslims should be governed by Shari'a law. Several ancient civilizations have influenced Afghan culture, such as the Persians, Mongols, and Arabs. Afghans maintain a proud tradition of poetry. In 2001, the Taliban destroyed two 1,500 year old massive Buddha statues in the Bamiyan Valley as they were viewed as idols. Traditional clothing continues to be widely worn, and consists of turbans or kufi for men, veils for women, and baggy, loose clothing called salwar kameez, common to the region.[2] Polygamy is common; mistreatment and violence directed toward women are widespread. Over half of the female population is estimated to marry before the age of sixteen.[3] Alcohol and cigarette consumption rates are low. Illicit substance use is an increasing problem, particularly with opiates.

Economy

GDP per capita: $2,000 (2017) [3.36% of U.S.]

Human Development Index: 0.498

Corruption Index: 15 (2017)

The economy remains underdeveloped and riddled by decades of warfare and political chaos, yet in the past decade foreign investment, international aid, and growth in agriculture and services has begun to improve conditions. Economic activity is limited due to dependence on foreign aid, lawlessness, Afghanistan's landlocked location, and the lack of national infrastructure. Economic growth significantly slowed in the mid-2010s after the departure of approximately 100,000 foreign military troops as the economy was artificially inflated due to their presence. Nearly one-quarter of the population is unemployed. More than half of Afghans live below the poverty line. Natural gas, oil, coal, salt, and abundant deposits of many minerals and precious metals are natural resources. Services account for 38% of the workforce and 56% of the GDP. Agriculture employs 44% of the workforce and generates 23% of the GDP, whereas industry employs 18% of the workforce and generates 21% of the GDP. Primary industries include textiles, soap, furniture, fertilizer, food products, and minerals. Common crops consist of opium poppy, wheat, fruit, and nuts. Animal skins and meat are important agricultural products. India, Pakistan, China, and Iran are primary trade partners.

Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium and ranks among the most corrupt countries in the world according to Transparency International. Only Somalia, South Sudan, and Syria had a lower rating on the 2017 Corruption Index. The Pakistani border remains unsecured in many areas, increasing illegal activity. Most heroin consumed in Europe and Eurasia is produced from opium poppies cultivated in Afghanistan. Corruption and lawlessness impede efforts to address drug cultivation problems. The Taliban utilized the cultivation of opium poppies for revenue, which is still deeply entrenched in agriculture for many areas. Afghanistan is also a regional supplier of hashish.

Faiths

Muslim: 99.7%

Other: 0.3%

Christians

Denominations – Members – Congregations

Evangelicals – 14,559

Latter-day Saints – 100? – 1

Catholic – 100?

Seventh Day Adventists – 5 – 0

Religion

The Taliban regime severely persecuted non-Muslims, many of who fled the country. Muslims today account for 99.7% of the population. Estimates for the percentage of Shia Muslims in the population vary from as low as 10% to as high as 25%. There are small communities of Sikhs, Hindus, Baha'is, and Christians. There are approximately 1,300 Sikhs and Hindus.[4] Kabul experiences the greatest religious diversity as some non-Muslim Afghans have returned to the capital in recent years.[5]

Religious Freedom

Persecution Index: 2nd (2018)

The constitution mandates that no laws can oppose Islamic teachings, provides equal recognition for Shi'a and Sunni Muslims, and guarantees the right for other religious groups to practice their faiths within the bounds of the law. Since the fall of the Taliban, the federal government has attempted to increase religious freedom, but societal abuse of religious freedom and intolerance are major challenges. Conflict continues between different Muslim sects, which in recent years has manifested itself in the proposed establishment of religious laws for some Muslim groups. Many non-Muslims keep their religious affiliation private to avoid harassment and persecution, worshipping in their homes. Some Muslim groups that follow Shari'a law consider apostasy from Islam a crime punishable by death, although there have been no recent instances of formerly Muslim Christian converts receiving the death penalty. Proselytism and the conversion of Muslims to other religions is illegal. Muslim women are

forbidden to marry non-Muslim men. Societal conflicts are often related to both religious affiliation and ethnicity. Some Christian missionaries do operate in the country in a discreet manner to avoid harassment. Religious groups are not required to register with the government, and non-Muslims are not required to study Islam in public schools. There are restrictions on the publication, importation, and dissemination of religious literature as literature cannot promote religions other than Islam.[6] In the late 2000s, some Christian aid organizations and missionary groups experienced persecution or kidnapping at the hand of terrorist organizations like the Taliban. In 2007, twenty-three South Korean aid workers sponsored by a Christian denomination were kidnapped by the Taliban, and two were executed.[7] The Islamic State in Khorasan Province and the Taliban continue to persistently target and kill those who belong to religious minority groups.[8]

Largest Cities

Urban: 25.5%

Kabul, **Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad, Konduz, Pol-e Khomri, Meymaneh, Sheberghan, Taloqan.**

Cities listed in **bold** have no official branches of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

One of the ten largest cities have a Church military branch. Twenty-two percent (22%) of the national population resides in the ten largest cities.

Church History

Latter-day Saints did not have a presence in Afghanistan until after the 2001 U.S.-led coalition invasion. United States servicemen constituted the entire church membership until a few native Afghans joined the Church shortly thereafter as a result of associations made with Latter-day Saint military personnel. In 2008, Afghanistan became part of the Middle East/Africa North Area.

Membership Growth

LDS Membership: 100? (2018)

In mid-2009, there were over 500 members in the country.[9] There were 700 Latter-day Saints in Afghanistan in late 2009,[10] all of who were foreign military personnel with the exception of a few Afghan converts. Some Afghans have also joined the church in New Delhi, India, and in London, England. Church membership significantly decreased following the withdrawal of most American military personnel in the mid-2010s.

Congregational Growth

Wards: 0 Branches: 4 Groups: 28 (2012)

The Church created the Kabul Afghanistan Military District on July 1st, 2008.[11] In late 2010, there were five branches and twenty-eight groups operating.[12] Military branches included the Kabul, Kandahar, Bagram, Salerno, and Leatherneck Branches. The district was discontinued in 2014. In 2018, only one branch remained in the entire country located in Kabul. Member groups may operate in additional locations to service Latter-day Saint American military personnel.

Activity and Retention

The Church has specifically prohibited any type of proselytism among Muslims in Afghanistan. Church leaders have also advised against the invitation of Muslims to attend church services or activities.[13] Afghanistan experiences high rates of member activity due to Latter-day Saint servicemen accounting for nearly all of Church membership. Active membership is estimated at 60, or 60% of total membership.

Language Materials

Languages with LDS Scripture: Iranian Persian, Arabic, Kazakh, Urdu, English.

The Church has translated all LDS scriptures and many church materials in Arabic. The entire Book of Mormon is available in Iranian Persian (Farsi) and Urdu. Gospel PrinciplesandThe Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith are available in Iranian Persian and Pashto. Kazakh LDS materials are limited to a few resources such a basic unit guidebook, the Articles of Faith,

General Conference addresses, and hymns and children's songs. Many church materials are available in Urdu, including three issues of the Liahona magazine per year.

Meetinghouses

Church meetings occur on U.S. military bases, often in chapels that serve as places of worship for various religious groups found among the armed forces.

Health and Safety

Conditions remain dangerous for foreigners living and working in the country due to a lack of government control in many regions and Taliban insurgency. In 2018, thirteen percent (13%) of administrative districts were under Taliban country, whereas fifty percent (50%) of administrative districts were contested between the federal government and Taliban. Living conditions are among the poorest in the world. Armed kidnappings and the murder of foreign aid workers have occurred on an ongoing basis.

Humanitarian and Development Work

As of 2018, the Church has conducted 35 humanitarian and development projects that have included community projects, emergency response, refugee response, and wheelchair donations.[14]

Opportunities, Challenges, and Prospects

Religious Freedom

Despite lawlessness and the social intolerance of non-Muslim groups, the Afghan government has numbered among the most proactive of Muslim nations in the region regarding the establishment of greater religious freedom. However, conditions for religious minority groups have significantly deteriorated in recent years. Today, there are no realistic prospects for native Afghanis to join the Church within their home country given proselytism bans and prohibitions regarding the conversion of Muslims to other religions. Violence and political instability pose significant, insurmountable safety risks for a Church establishment among the native population or non-military foreigners.

Cultural Issues

Negative social attitudes regarding conversion from Islam and Christian proselytism create cultural barriers for missionary activity. Afghani women have traditionally received very little education due to government restrictions and cultural norms. Consequently, only 24% of women were literate in 2015. The poor treatment of women in many areas may create cultural challenges for Latter-day Saints to address with Afghans who are victims or perpetrators of abuse. Those engaged in a polygamous relationship must end these relations in divorce and be interviewed by a member of a mission or area presidency to be baptized. Corruption and drug cultivation and trafficking create unsafe conditions in many areas for full-time missionaries and non-Muslims. The Church has yet to develop teaching approaches and resources tailored to those from a Muslim religious background.

National Outreach

Current missionary outreach is limited to the associations of U.S. military members and the few local Afghani converts albeit it is unclear whether any of these Afghani converts remain in the country today. There have been no organized mission outreach efforts made by the Church in Afghanistan and there is no official church presence. If missionary work were to occur in Kabul, 12% of the population would be reached by the Church. Latter-day Saints do not undertake formal missionary activity due to cultural restrictions, past violence, and conflict resulting from decades of war, lawlessness, and the lack of indigenous members in sufficient numbers to organize the Church among the nonmilitary population. Distance from established mission outreach centers in Pakistan and India have contributed to the lack of a formal church presence over the years. Some Afghan expatriates have joined the Church in other countries such as India and the United States during the past decade, but these new converts express little or no desire to return to their homeland. Afghani Latter-day Saints in other nations may one day assist in establishing the Church in Afghanistan as full-time missionaries.

Prospects for national outreach in the near future appear doubtful due to the cultural restrictions of proselytizing Muslims, ongoing violence, and the difficulty in searching out the small, hidden Afghani Christian community. Due to its large population, central geographic location, greater government control, and recent influx of non-Muslims, Kabul offers the most realistic prospects for member referral-based mission outreach in the coming years and decades. In the event that the government

establishes law and security throughout the country, prospective mission outreach by Latter-day Saints in Kabul could potentially reach most of Afghanistan's major ethnic groups, providing an impetus for converts from these groups to bring the church to their respective regions of the country. Three-fourths of the population resides in rural areas and will likely not receive any mission outreach for decades following a formal church establishment in Kabul and other major cities.

Member Activity and Convert Retention

Member activity and convert retention rates are moderate to high, as most the Latter-day Saints are U.S. servicemen. Convert retention rates from the small Afghani Latter-day Saint membership are unknown due to their low profile and private nature of their worship and faith. Convert retention rates may be higher than average due to the high level of commitment for locals to join the Church in the face of potential persecution, ostracism, and isolation from family and social groups.

Ethnic Issues and Integration

Tribalism and past conflict between the multiplicity of ethnic groups creates challenges for greater national stability and the integration of varying ethnic groups into the same congregations. Language-specific congregations, if organized once the number of local members speaking different languages necessitates it, may help reduce potential conflict at church.

Language Issues

A limited number of proselytizing materials are translated into the native languages spoken by only 35% of the population. Dari—the Afghan dialect of Persian or Farsi—is spoken by half the population and possesses similarities with its Iranian counterpart, allowing for some usage of Farsi-language materials among Dari speakers in Afghanistan. Church materials are translated in languages spoken as a second language of as many as 89% of the population. Low literacy rates in many areas challenge efforts to distribute religious literature and utilize the Internet for missionary activity to Afghanis but provide future opportunities for Latter-day Saints to engage in literacy programs.

Missionary Service

No known Afghan Latter-day Saints have served a full-time mission. Missionaries have never been assigned to serve in Afghanistan.

Leadership

Military servicemen or nonnatives staff leadership for all congregations nationwide. There appear to be no native church leaders.

Temple

Afghanistan pertains to the Frankfurt Germany Temple district, like most nations in the Middle East/Africa North Area. Temple trips are feasible only for military personnel, as there are no operating temples nearby. Afghanistan may be reassigned to the Bengaluru India Temple once the temple is completed.

Comparative Growth

Afghanistan is one of the only nations in southwestern Asia to have an official congregation although this branch appears to exclusively service U.S. military personnel. Neighboring Pakistan exhibits strong self-sufficiency in church administration, as all full-time missionaries assigned to the country are native members. Steady membership and congregation growth has occurred in Pakistan over the past three decades. There used to be nearly twice as many Latter-day Saints in Iraq[15] than in Afghanistan although in 2018 there was no longer an official branch in Iraq due to the department of nearly all American military personnel. The only nation in the region that has had a mission organized was Iran in the late 1970s. Fewer than fifty converts were baptized in the Iran Tehran Mission as a result of cultural issues and the brief duration of the mission's operation.

Missionary-minded Christian groups usually do not publish statistics regarding church membership in Afghanistan due to security concerns for their members and to maintain a low profile for missionary activity. Many Christian groups have gained a few Afghan converts, but church growth remains slow due to cultural restrictions.

Future Prospects

Present lawlessness outside Kabul, negative attitudes of Christian missionary activity, legal and societal prohibitions regarding

the proselytism and conversion of Muslims, and the few nonmilitary Latter-day Saints in the country create persistent challenges for an official church establishment and missionary activity over the long-term. Violence and political instability are insurmountable safety concerns for missionary activity, especially since Christian aid groups or religious minorities are often targets by terrorists. There would likely be no official congregations in Afghanistan if there was not a continued U.S. military presence in the country. Therefore, if the foreign military presence is entirely removed one day, there will likely no longer be any Latter-day Saint presence in Afghanistan whatsoever. Afghanis living abroad demonstrated receptivity to the Church in small numbers in the 2000s, indicating some potential for church growth if missionary outreach is pursued with the proper vision and resources, such as performing humanitarian and development work that is badly needed in many areas, strengthening the few local Latter-day Saints, and the careful search for Afghani Christians and presenting the gospel in an appropriate manner. Most ethnic groups have had no exposure to Latter-day Saint mission outreach. It is unclear how some of these groups may respond to potential missionary activity one day.

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[4] “Afghanistan,” International Religious Freedom Report 2017. Accessed 17 October 2018. https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2017&dlid=281016#wrapper

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[9] “An island of peace in the middle of war,” LDS Church News, 17 August 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/57771/An-island-of-peace-in-the-middle-of-war.html

[10] Askar, Jamshid. “Military district in Iraq will be ‘big difference,’” LDS Church News, 21 November 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/58227/Military-district-in-Iraq-will-be-big-difference.html

[11] Askar, Jamshid. “Military district in Iraq will be ‘big difference,’” LDS Church News, 21 November 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/58227/Military-district-in-Iraq-will-be-big-difference.html

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[13] Kenneth L. Alford, “Organizing the Church in Afghanistan” in The World Wide Church: The Global Reach of Mormonism, Michael Goodman and Mauro Properzi, eds. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2016), 49–70.

[14] “Where We Work,” LDS Charities. Accessed 18 October 2018. https://www.ldscharities.org/where-we-work

[15] Askar, Jamshid. “Military district in Iraq will be ‘big difference,’” LDS Church News, 21 November 2009. http://www.ldschurchnews.com/articles/58227/Military-district-in-Iraq-will-be-big-difference.html