

Chapter 18: Pakistan and Afghanistan

Summary

Pakistan and Afghanistan are neighbors on the western side of South Asia, with a long mountain frontier between them and a famous road that crosses it. This chapter tours Pakistan first: how the country is governed, its capital, its four provinces, and the many languages that sit beside Urdu, its national language. Then it turns to Afghanistan: its mountains and capital, its two official languages, the Pashtun code of Pashtunwali, its heritage sites and its carpets, along with a brief, dated look at who governs it today. Along the way you'll see how cultural regions like the Punjab and the Pashtun belt cross the lines on a modern map.

Concepts Covered

1. Islamic Republic of Pakistan
2. Islamabad
3. Provinces of Pakistan
4. Punjab Region
5. Lahore
6. Sindh
7. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

8. Balochistan
9. Urdu as National Language
10. Afghanistan
11. Kabul
12. Dari and Pashto
13. Pashtunwali
14. Khyber Pass
15. Buddhas of Bamiyan
16. Afghan Carpets

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the eight countries, the Hindu Kush and the Indus River
- **Chapter 3: Empires and Encounters** for the Mughal Empire
- **Chapter 4: Colonialism, Independence, and Partition** for how Pakistan was created in 1947
- **Chapter 6: Languages and Scripts** is helpful for the Perso-Arabic script

Two neighbors, one old road



Hi, I'm Mora! Pakistan and Afghanistan show up in the news a lot, usually in short, scary headlines that leave out the people, the poetry, the food and the festivals. If your family is from either country, this chapter gives you words for the places you hear about at home. If it isn't, it helps you see your classmates' homelands as more than a headline.

18.1 Dinner at the Qureshis'

On a Saturday in October, Ayesha Qureshi's family invites Zara Hossain and Ben Lindqvist over for dinner. Ayesha's family is from Lahore, in Pakistan, and they speak Urdu at home. The table is crowded: a big pot of biryani, a bowl of chickpeas, flatbread still warm from the pan, and a plate of kebabs. Ayesha spends most of dinner arguing with her cousin about cricket.

Ben sits next to Ayesha's uncle, who asks him what he knows about Pakistan. Ben admits that he knows almost nothing, except that it is next to India and next to Afghanistan, "which I always thought was in the Middle East." The uncle laughs. "Afghanistan is our neighbor, beta. Lahore and Kabul were tied together by the same roads and the same empires for centuries. The first Mughal emperor ruled from Kabul before he ever saw Lahore, and he chose to be buried in Kabul. My grandfather bought carpets that came down through the Khyber Pass."

Ben looks at Zara. Zara shrugs; her family is from Bangladesh, at the other end of South Asia. "I know Pakistan and Bangladesh used to be one country," she says. "But I don't really know what's in Pakistan, or in Afghanistan." Ben pulls out his phone and opens a map. There's a line between the two countries. So how can two places on either side of a border, with different governments and different flags, be "tied together"?

18.2 Borders and Cultural Regions

Start with an example from closer to home. The Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) people have lived around the Great Lakes for centuries, on land that today is split between Minnesota, other US states and Canada. The US-Canada border runs right through their homeland. A family in northern Minnesota and a

family in Ontario can share a language, ceremonies and relatives, even though they carry different passports.

South Asia is full of situations like this. A **country** is a political unit with a government and borders, as you learned in [Chapter 1](#). A **cultural region** is an area where people share a language, customs or history, whether or not a border runs through it. In this chapter you'll meet two big cultural regions that cross borders:

- **The Punjab**, split in 1947 between Pakistan and India.
- **The Pashtun homeland**, split in 1893 between British India (today Pakistan) and Afghanistan.

So when you compare Pakistan and Afghanistan, ask two kinds of questions. How are the two countries governed, and what are their official languages and capitals? And which cultures, roads and families reach across the line?

18.3 Pakistan: A Country Born in 1947

Pakistan became independent on 14 August 1947, the day Pakistan celebrates as Independence Day, when British India was divided ([Chapter 4](#)). At first Pakistan had two wings, West Pakistan and East Pakistan, on opposite sides of India. In 1971, after a war, East Pakistan became the independent country of Bangladesh, which you'll meet in [Chapter 19](#). Today's Pakistan is the old western wing.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan

The country's full name is the **Islamic Republic of Pakistan**: a federal, parliamentary republic in which Islam is the state religion. The name was adopted in Pakistan's first constitution, which took effect on 23 March 1956. The constitution in force today dates from 1973. *Federal* means power is

shared between a national government and provincial governments.

Parliamentary means the prime minister, who runs the government day to day, is chosen by the elected National Assembly, while the president is head of state.

As of October 2026, Pakistan's prime minister is Shehbaz Sharif, in office since March 2024, and its president is Asif Ali Zardari, who took the oath of office on 10 March 2024. Like any country's politics, Pakistan's is lively and contested, and this book leaves the arguments to the news.

How many people?

Pakistan had **255,219,554 people in 2025** (about 255 million, World Bank), making it one of the ten most populous countries on Earth. Pakistan's own 2023 census, the country's seventh, counted 241.49 million people, with a growth rate of 2.55% a year. (The two numbers differ because they are from different years and use different methods.)

About 96% of Pakistanis are Muslim, most of them Sunni, with a large Shia minority. The 2023 census counted Hindus at 1.61% of the population, the largest religious minority, and Christians at 1.37%. Some Christian leaders believe their community was undercounted. There are also smaller communities of Sikhs, Parsis and Ahmadis.

Islamabad

Islamabad (*is-LAHM-ah-bahd*) is the capital of Pakistan. Its name means "City of Islam" or "City of Peace." It is a planned city, which means it was designed from scratch rather than growing over centuries. When Pakistan was founded, the capital was Karachi, a busy port on the Arabian Sea. In 1959 a commission chose a new site in the north, on the Potwar Plateau below the Margala Hills, next to the older city of Rawalpindi, which served as the temporary capital. Construction began in 1961. The city is laid out in zones,

including government, diplomatic, residential and commercial areas, a greenbelt and a national park.

Just outside Islamabad lie the ruins of Taxila, an ancient city on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1980. From the 400s BCE to the 100s CE it was an important Buddhist center of learning, shaped in turn by Persia, Greece and Central Asia. Keep that in mind; we'll come back to those roads in Section 18.9.

18.4 The Provinces of Pakistan

The **Provinces of Pakistan** are the four large regions, each with its own elected assembly and government, into which the country is divided: Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The capital city has its own federal territory, the Islamabad Capital Territory. In the far north, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir are areas administered by Pakistan that are part of the larger Kashmir region, whose status is disputed among Pakistan, India and China. Pakistan regards them as its territory with special arrangements, India claims them, and the dispute is unresolved.

Province	Capital	Population (2023 census)	Main first languages
Punjab	Lahore	127.68 million	Punjabi, Saraiki
Sindh	Karachi	55.69 million	Sindhi, Urdu
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Peshawar	40.85 million	Pashto
Balochistan	Quetta	14.89 million	Balochi, Pashto

Province	Capital	Population (2023 census)	Main first languages
Islamabad Capital Territory	(Islamabad)	2.36 million	Punjabi, Urdu and others

More than half of all Pakistanis live in Punjab, and each province has its own main language: Pakistan is a country of several large peoples.

Punjab and the Punjab Region

The **Punjab Region** is the cultural and geographic region of the five rivers that feed the Indus, today divided between Pakistan's Punjab province and India's Punjab state. The name comes from Persian words for "five" and "water." The five rivers are the Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas and Sutlej. Their water and rich soil made the Punjab one of the great farming regions of the subcontinent.

In 1947 the British province of Punjab was split in two. West Punjab, slightly more than half, went to Pakistan, and East Punjab went to India. Millions of people crossed the new line in both directions, a painful story told in [Chapter 4](#). Today most people in Pakistani Punjab are Muslim, and Sikhs are the majority in Indian Punjab. Yet people on both sides still share the Punjabi language, much of the same music and food, and in many cases family memories of the other side. Even the script tells this story: Punjabi in Pakistan is written in Shahmukhi, a Perso-Arabic script, while in India it is mostly written in Gurmukhi.

Lahore

Lahore (لاہور, *lah-HOR*) is Pakistan's second-largest city and the capital of Punjab province. It sits on the Ravi River in the upper Indus plain. Lahore has been a royal city many times: a Ghaznavid capital in the 1100s, a favorite Mughal residence in the 1500s and 1600s, and the seat of the Sikh ruler Ranjit Singh from 1799 to 1839.

Lahore's Mughal buildings are its pride. The Lahore Fort was built in part by the emperor Akbar and expanded by the emperors who followed him. The Shalamar Gardens, laid out in 1642 for the emperor Shah Jahan, are terraced, walled gardens with hundreds of fountains. Together the fort and the gardens became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1981. Nearby stands the Badshahi Mosque, built by the emperor Aurangzeb in 1671 to 1673, still one of the largest mosques in the world. A popular Punjabi saying claims that whoever hasn't seen Lahore hasn't really been born, and Ayesha's uncle repeats it at every family dinner.

Sindh

Sindh is Pakistan's southeastern province, the land of the lower Indus River and its delta, with Karachi as its capital. The province even takes its name from the river, which is known as the Sindhu in Pakistan. Sindh was one of the heartlands of the Indus Valley Civilization more than 4,000 years ago, and its most famous city, Mohenjo-daro, is a UNESCO World Heritage site (1980) ([Chapter 2](#)).

Sindh also has a special place in the history of Islam in South Asia: the Arab conquest of Sindh in 711 CE was one of the first ways Islam came into the subcontinent. Today Karachi, on the Arabian Sea, is Pakistan's largest city and main port, drawing people from every part of the country. In the 2023 census, about 60% of people in Sindh spoke Sindhi as their first language and about 22% spoke Urdu.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (*KY-ber pukh-TOON-khwah*) is Pakistan's northwestern province, bordering Afghanistan, with Peshawar as its capital. Until 2010 it was called the North-West Frontier Province. Its new name joins two ideas: "Khyber," after the famous pass, and "Pakhtunkhwa," roughly "land of the Pashtuns."

The province rises from the fertile Vale of Peshawar into the Hindu Kush. Most people are Pashtuns, Pashto is the main language (spoken by 81% as a first language in the 2023 census), and nearly everyone is Muslim. Peshawar is one of the oldest cities in the region and a center of Pashtun culture.

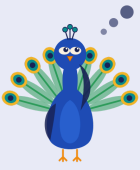
In October 2026 the province was in the news: on 11 October the federal government declared an emergency there and suspended the provincial government, which had been led by the PTI party, citing security concerns. PTI leaders called the move undemocratic. Events were still unfolding as this book was written.

Balochistan

Balochistan is Pakistan's westernmost province, bordering Iran and Afghanistan, with Quetta as its capital. It is the largest province by area and the most thinly populated. Much of it is dry plateau, desert and mountains outside the reach of the monsoon, and sheep raising is a major way of life.

Balochistan has two main peoples: the Baloch and the Pashtuns. In the 2023 census, about 40% of the province spoke Balochi as their first language and about 34% spoke Pashto. Brahui and Sindhi are also spoken.

Try this



Look back at the province table. If you only met people from Lahore, what would you assume "Pakistani food" or "the Pakistani language" is? Now imagine a friend from Quetta or Karachi reading your answer. What would they add?

18.5 Urdu and Pakistan's Many Mother Tongues

Urdu as National Language

Urdu as National Language means that Urdu (اردو, *OOR-doo*) is the language Pakistan's constitution names as the language of the whole nation, even though only a small share of Pakistanis speak it as their first language. Article 251 of the 1973 constitution says that Urdu is the national language of Pakistan, that English may be used for official purposes, and that provinces may promote their own provincial languages alongside Urdu.

Urdu is written right to left in a flowing Perso-Arabic style called Nastaliq, and everyday spoken Urdu is very close to everyday Hindi, as you saw in [Chapter 6](#).

What people speak at home

In practice, most Pakistanis grow up speaking another language at home and learn Urdu at school, on TV and in the city. Here are the most common first languages in the 2023 census:

First language (mother tongue)	Share of Pakistan's population, 2023 census
Punjabi	about 37%
Pashto	about 18%
Sindhi	about 14%
Saraiki	about 12%
Urdu	about 9%
Balochi	about 3%
Other languages	about 6%

So Urdu is everybody's second language more than it is anybody's first. That's exactly why it works as a national language: it belongs to no single province. Urdu's share has been growing, though, from about 7% in the 2017 census to about 9% in 2023, as more families in big cities raise their children in Urdu. Ayesha's family is one of them: her grandparents spoke Punjabi at home in Lahore, but her parents mostly spoke Urdu to her. English is widely used in government, law and higher education, and many Pakistanis switch between two or three languages in one conversation.

One country, many languages



If a Pakistani friend says "my language is Punjabi" or "Pashto" instead of "Urdu," they aren't being unusual. Ask "What do you speak at home?" instead of assuming.

18.6 Afghanistan: Mountains, Valleys and Many Peoples

Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country where South Asia meets Central Asia and Iran, and the eighth member of SAARC, which it joined in 2007. Landlocked means it has no coastline; the nearest sea, the Arabian Sea, is about 480 km to the south. Afghanistan had **43,844,111 people in 2025** (about 44 million, World Bank).

The Hindu Kush runs through the middle of the country ([Chapter 1](#)), and most of the land gets its rain and snow in winter and spring rather than from the monsoon. For thousands of years, Afghanistan's passes linked South Asia, Central Asia, Iran and China.

Afghanistan has many peoples. Pashtuns are the largest group. Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks and Turkmen are other large communities, along with many smaller ones. Nearly all Afghans are Muslim: most are Sunni, and a Shia minority (estimates range from about 10% to 15%) includes most Hazaras. Afghanistan once had Sikh and Hindu communities estimated in the hundreds of thousands in the 1970s, but nearly all have left; only small numbers remain, mostly in Kabul, Jalalabad and Ghazni.

Afghanistan was never formally colonized. Britain fought wars there in the 1800s and controlled Afghanistan's foreign relations until the Treaty of Rawalpindi in 1919.

Kabul

Kabul (کابل, *KAH-bool*) is the capital and largest city of Afghanistan. It sits about 1,800 m (5,900 ft) above sea level in a valley ringed by mountains, along the Kabul River, which flows east to join the Indus in Pakistan. People have lived at or near Kabul for about 3,500 years.

Kabul has long depended on trade, and its bazaars are famous across the region. It is also a city of many peoples: Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen and others live side by side. Babur, who founded the Mughal Empire in 1526, ruled from Kabul before he marched into India, and he chose a garden in Kabul as his final resting place. That garden, Bagh-e Babur, was restored between 2003 and 2007 and now draws more than 400,000 visitors a year.

Dari and Pashto

Dari and Pashto are Afghanistan's two official national languages, a status first set out in the 1964 constitution.

- **Dari** (دری, *dah-REE*) is the form of Persian spoken in Afghanistan. It is close enough to the Persian of Iran (Farsi) that speakers understand each other easily. Dari has long been the language that Afghans of different groups use to talk to each other, and it is understood by most people in the country.
- **Pashto** (پښتو, *PUSH-toh*) is the language of the Pashtuns, spoken on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. As you saw above, it is also Pakistan's second-most-common first language.

Both are written in versions of the Perso-Arabic script, right to left, and both belong to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. Many Afghans speak both, and many also speak Uzbek, Turkmen or another language. The 2004 constitution of the former republic gave several of these,

including Uzbek, Turkmen and Balochi, official status in areas where most people speak them.

18.7 Afghanistan Today

Afghanistan's last half century has been marked by war: a Soviet invasion and occupation (1979 to 1989), civil war, the first Taliban government (1996 to 2001), a US-led war that removed it in 2001, and two decades of an internationally backed republic.

In August 2021, as US and NATO forces withdrew, the Taliban, an Islamist movement, took control of Kabul and the country. The Taliban call their government the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. It is led by a supreme leader and rules by its own interpretation of Islamic law.

Most countries have not formally recognized the Taliban as Afghanistan's government. In July 2025 Russia became the first country to do so, and as of October 2026 it was still the only one, though several countries, including China and the United Arab Emirates, keep diplomatic ties and talk with Taliban officials. Much of the world's hesitation centers on restrictions on women and girls. Girls have been barred from secondary school since March 2022, and women from universities since December 2022. In August 2026, UNESCO estimated that about 2.4 million girls were shut out of secondary education, and said Afghanistan was the only country in the world with such a ban. The government has rejected calls to lift the ban, calling it an internal matter.

Culture has changed too. For example, Nowruz, the spring new year on 21 March that many Afghans have celebrated for centuries, is no longer an official public holiday. In 2025 the government said people could still mark it privately.

Ordinary Afghans carry on, keeping traditions alive at home and in a large worldwide diaspora. Millions of Afghans have lived as refugees in Pakistan and Iran over the decades. Since 2023, Pakistan has sent more than a million Afghans back across the border under a campaign against people living in Pakistan without legal status.

Check the date on the news



This section describes Afghanistan as of October 2026, and news here changes fast. When you read about the Taliban, remember that a government and a people are not the same thing: many Afghan families, at home and abroad, hold very different views about how their country should be run.

18.8 Pashtunwali: The Pashtun Way

The **Pashtuns** (also called Pakhtuns, and in older English "Pathans") are an ethnic group of tens of millions of people who live mainly in the region between the Hindu Kush in Afghanistan and the Indus River in Pakistan. They are the largest group in Afghanistan, and in fact the word "Afghan" once meant a Pashtun before it came to mean anyone from Afghanistan. What unites Pashtuns is their language, Pashto, along with Islam (most Pashtuns are Sunni) and a shared code of conduct.

Pashtunwali (*push-toon-WAH-lee*) is that code: the traditional, unwritten rules of honor, hospitality and justice that guide Pashtun social life. It is older than Islam in the region and is a matter of custom, not religious law, though for most Pashtuns it sits comfortably alongside their faith. Its main ideas include:

Idea	Pashto word	What it means
Hospitality	melmastia (<i>mel-mus-TEE-ah</i>)	Welcome every guest generously, whoever they are, and expect nothing back.
Sanctuary	nanawatai (<i>nah-nah-wah-TAI</i>)	Protect someone who comes to you asking for shelter, even from their enemies.
Honor	nang (<i>nung</i>)	Defend your family's honor and protect the weak.
Justice	badal (<i>BAH-dul</i>)	A wrong must be answered; this can mean revenge, but often it is settled by compensation instead.
Council	jirga (<i>JEER-gah</i>)	Settle disputes in an assembly of elders who talk until they reach agreement.

Kinship is the base of Pashtun society. Tribes trace descent from a common ancestor and are divided into clans and families.

Like any code, Pashtunwali is lived differently by different families, in the city and the village, at home and abroad. Outsiders often focus on badal and blood feuds, but hospitality is just as central. Ben's welcome at the Qureshis' table (a Punjabi family, not a Pashtun one) shows how seriously hospitality is taken across this whole region.

Whose Story?

The border between Pakistan and Afghanistan is called the Durand Line, after the British official who negotiated it with Afghanistan's ruler in 1893. It runs about 2,600 km and split the Pashtun homeland in two. Pakistan inherited the line in 1947 and treats it as a settled international border; it began building a fence along it in 2017. Every Afghan government since 1947, whoever was in power, has said the line is void because it was imposed by the British, and some Pashtuns on both sides see it as cutting through one people. In 2025 and again in early 2026, fighting along the border led Pakistan to close crossings such as Torkham for weeks. Ask a Pakistani and an Afghan to draw "the border," and you may get two different answers, and two different histories.

18.9 The Khyber Pass

The **Khyber Pass** (*KY-ber*) is the mountain pass that connects Peshawar in Pakistan with Kabul in Afghanistan, crossing the hills at the end of the Spin Ghar ("White Mountains") range. The pass winds about 53 km (33 miles) from near the town of Jamrud, Pakistan, to the border post of Torkham. In places it is a narrow gorge between cliffs of shale and limestone 180 to 300 m high. Its highest point, at Landi Kotal, is about 1,072 m above sea level.

Few mountain passes in the world have seen so much history:

- In the 500s BCE, the Persian king Darius I conquered the area around Kabul and marched through the pass to the Indus.
- In the 200s BCE, under the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, Buddhism flourished in and around the Khyber, and Buddhist stupas still stand near the pass.

- The pass was part of the Silk Road, linking Taxila (near today's Islamabad) with Kabul.
- In 1526 Babur, then ruler of Kabul, came through the Khyber before defeating the Delhi sultan at the First Battle of Panipat and founding the Mughal Empire.
- The British fought for control of the pass during the Anglo-Afghan wars of the 1800s. A railway with 34 tunnels opened in 1925 from Peshawar to near the border, though services stopped in 2007.

The pass carried traders and goods as well as armies, and it carried ideas and faiths too: Buddhism spread through these valleys in Ashoka's time, and later Muslim rulers, scholars and artists came the other way. That's what Ayesha's uncle meant when he said Lahore and Kabul were tied together. The road ran from Kabul down the Kabul River valley to Jalalabad, through the Khyber to Peshawar, past Taxila and on across the Punjab plain to Lahore and beyond to Delhi.

Since 1947 the pass has been in Pakistani territory. It is still an important road, but traffic is often interrupted by violence and by disputes between the two governments.

18.10 Heritage in Stone: Bamiyan, Jam and Pakistan's Ancient Sites

The Buddhas of Bamiyan

The **Buddhas of Bamiyan** were two giant standing statues of the Buddha carved into a sandstone cliff in the Bamiyan Valley of central Afghanistan, destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001. The larger statue was 55 m (180 ft) tall and the smaller one 38 m (125 ft). Radiocarbon dating suggests they were made in the late 500s and early 600s CE.

Why were giant Buddhas in the middle of the Hindu Kush? Bamiyan was a stopping place on a branch of the Silk Road linking China and India. Buddhist monks carved many caves into the cliffs as monasteries and chapels, some with wall paintings mixing Indian, Greek, Roman and Persian influences in the style called Gandharan art. Later, Muslim dynasties built fortresses in the valley.

In March 2001, during its first period in power, the Taliban ordered the destruction of all statues in Afghanistan and blew up both Buddhas. The destruction was condemned around the world. In 2003 UNESCO added the Cultural Landscape and Archaeological Remains of the Bamiyan Valley to the World Heritage List and to its List of World Heritage in Danger. Today the two empty niches remain. People still debate whether the statues should be rebuilt from fragments, or whether the empty niches should stay as a memorial.

The Minaret of Jam

In a remote river valley in central Afghanistan, about 1,900 m above sea level, stands the Minaret of Jam, a brick tower 65 m tall built in 1194 by the Ghurid sultan Ghiyas-od-din. It is covered in geometric patterns and a band of Arabic calligraphy in turquoise tile. UNESCO listed it as a World Heritage site in 2002, Afghanistan's first.

Pakistan's World Heritage sites

Pakistan's heritage stretches across every era of South Asian history. Here are four of its UNESCO World Heritage sites:

Site	Where	Inscribed	What it shows
Archaeological Ruins at Moenjodaro	Sindh	1980	A planned city of the Indus Valley Civilization
Taxila	Punjab, near Islamabad	1980	An ancient city and Buddhist center on the old trade routes
Buddhist Ruins of Takht-i-Bahi	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	1980	A Buddhist monastery founded in the 1st century CE on a high hilltop
Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore	Punjab	1981	Mughal palaces and gardens

Put these next to Bamiyan and Jam and a pattern appears. The Buddhist sites of Takht-i-Bahi and Taxila in Pakistan and Bamiyan in Afghanistan belong to the same Gandharan world, joined by the same roads. Modern borders cut across a shared past.

18.11 Afghan Carpets

Afghan Carpets are hand-knotted wool rugs woven in Afghanistan, especially in the north and west, in traditions passed down within families for

generations. They are one of the country's best-known crafts and an important source of income for many households.

How is a knotted carpet made? A weaver stretches strong threads on a loom. Then, row by row, she ties small knots of colored wool around those threads and cuts them short, so the cut ends stand up to form a soft, tufted surface called the pile. Weavers also make flatweave rugs, whose threads aren't knotted, along with bags and animal trappings for daily use.

Most Afghan carpet weaving was traditionally done by women of nomadic and semi-nomadic herding groups, such as the Turkmen and the Baluch, in the north and west of the country. Each tradition has its own look:

- **Turkmen carpets** are mostly red, with rows of repeated abstract motifs called guls (*goolz*). Each gul pattern was linked to a particular clan.
- **Baluch carpets** are more colorful and, while mostly abstract, often include floral designs and figures.

Hazara, Uzbek and Kyrgyz communities have their own weaving traditions too. Weaving was a family skill, passed down at home; red dyes were long made from the root of the madder plant. In refugee families of the 1980s, boys and young men also wove alongside women.

During the wars of the 1980s, millions of Afghans fled to Pakistan, and refugee weavers kept the craft alive in camps there. After Soviet troops invaded in December 1979, some weavers began making "war rugs," which worked tanks, helicopters and other military images into traditional patterns, a record of what weavers lived through. The British Museum has exhibited them as a form of history told in wool. Peshawar became the biggest market for Afghan carpets, and the carpets traveled down the same Khyber road that Ayesha's great-grandfather knew.

Carpets aren't Afghanistan's only famous craft. In 2025 UNESCO added Afghanistan's tradition of miniature painting in the style of Kamal ud-Din

Behzad, a famous painter whose style many Afghan artists still use as their model, to its list of intangible cultural heritage. In 2024 it listed the art of crafting and playing the rubab, a string instrument carved from mulberry wood and one of the oldest instruments in the region, as heritage shared by Afghanistan, Iran, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

18.12 Putting It Together

Back at the Qureshis', Ben has stopped eating to listen to Ayesha's uncle, which, for Ben, is a big deal. He finally understands the line on the map. It's real: it marks two countries with different governments, laws and official languages. But it doesn't mark where Punjabi or Pashto stops, where the old road ends, or where hospitality begins.

This table compares the two countries:

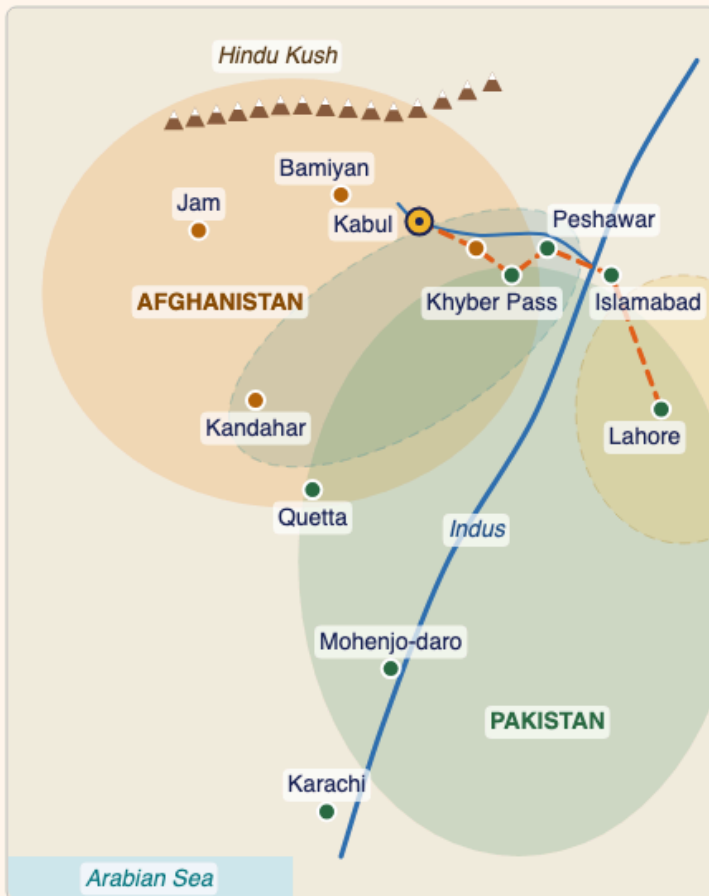
	Pakistan	Afghanistan
Capital	Islamabad	Kabul
Population (2025, World Bank)	255,219,554 (about 255 million)	43,844,111 (about 44 million)
Official or national languages	Urdu (national), English (official)	Dari and Pashto
Most common first language	Punjabi	Dari is the most widely understood
Main faith	Islam (about 96%)	Islam (nearly all)

	Pakistan	Afghanistan
Coastline?	Yes, on the Arabian Sea	No, landlocked
Government (October 2026)	Federal parliamentary republic	Taliban government, recognized only by Russia
A UNESCO site	Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore	Minaret of Jam; Bamiyan Valley

Diagram: Country Compare

Country Compare: Pakistan and Afghanistan

Pick a country or region in the menu. Tap a dot. Press Start to travel the Khyber road.



Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders.
The dashed orange line is the old road from Kabul to Lahore. Press Start to travel it.

Pakistan

A country

Capital

Islamabad

Population (2025)

255,219,554 (about 255 million), World Bank

Languages

Urdu is the national language; English is official.
Most common first language: Punjabi (about 37%, 2023 census)

Main faith

Islam (about 96%); Hindu and Christian minorities

UNESCO site

Fort and Shalamar Gardens in Lahore (1981)

Food

Biryani, nihari and karahi; chapli kebab in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

Festivals

Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha; Independence Day, 14 August

Pakistan Compare card: country or region

[Back to Country Compare Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch18-pakistan-afghanistan-compare/main.html>

[Open the Country Compare fullscreen](#)

MicroSim specification: Country Compare

sim-id: ch18-pakistan-afghanistan-compare

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Analyze

Bloom Verb: compare

Learning Objective: The learner will compare Pakistan and Afghanistan on the same set of features and analyze how cultural regions (the Punjab and the Pashtun belt) and the Khyber road connect places on both sides of today's border.

Canvas: responsive width; 700 px drawing area plus 100 px control area.

Controls: card view menu (Pakistan, Afghanistan, Punjab region, Pashtun belt), Start the Khyber road / Pause button, Reset button; click or tap any city dot.

Behavior: A schematic map of labeled dots (no borders) shows cities and heritage sites, the Hindu Kush and the Indus and Kabul rivers, with soft shaded areas for the two countries and dashed areas for the two cultural regions. The comparison card shows capital, 2025 population (World Bank), languages, main faith, a UNESCO site, foods and festivals, or a region's description. The animation starts paused; Start moves a traveler along the old road from Kabul through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar, Islamabad and Lahore, with a caption for each stop. The caption "Schematic map, not to scale. Not an official depiction of borders." is drawn inside the drawing area.

Start with the comparison card. Read the Pakistan card, then switch to Afghanistan and go row by row. Which rows are most alike? Which are most different? Then switch to **Punjab region** and **Pashtun belt** and watch where the shaded areas fall. Notice that each one spreads across the place where the two countries meet, or across the Pakistan-India border.

Then press **Start the Khyber road** and follow the traveler from Kabul to Lahore. Pause at the Khyber Pass. Think about what it would have meant to carry carpets, fruit or a holy book through that gorge on a camel or a horse, and why so many empires wanted to control it. Click the dots for Bamiyan, Jam and Mohenjo-daro to see how much older this region's history is than its current borders.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about a city or region they know in Pakistan or Afghanistan, or the place their own family comes from: the food, the way guests are welcomed, and the languages spoken at home. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Ask if you can take notes. If you can, bring a cup of tea or a snack to share; in many families from this region, a conversation starts with food.

Questions to ask

1. Which city, town or region does our family (or your family) come from?
What do you remember most about it?
2. What did a typical meal look like there? Is there one dish that tastes like home to you?
3. When guests came to the house, what did the family always do or serve?

4. Which languages did people speak at home, at school and in the market? Which ones do you still use?
5. How has that place, or the way your family lives, changed since you were young, or since you moved?
6. What is one custom or value from that place that you hope I keep?

Listen for: which of the Provinces of Pakistan or which part of Afghanistan they mention; whether they speak Urdu, Punjabi, Pashto, Dari or another language (connect to Urdu as National Language and Dari and Pashto); and hospitality customs that echo Pashtunwali, even in families that aren't Pashtun.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

? Your turn: compare two answers

Compare the languages your elder named with the 2023 census table in Section 18.5. Does your family's story fit the pattern (a home language plus Urdu or Dari), or is it different? If a friend interviewed someone from another region, compare how each family welcomes guests.

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Afghanistan is in the Middle East.

Reality: Afghanistan is a landlocked country in south-central Asia, where South Asia meets Central Asia and Iran. It is a member of SAARC, so this book counts it as South Asian, and some scholars group it with Central Asia. Some organizations do group it with the Middle East for statistics; since 2025 the

World Bank has put Afghanistan and Pakistan in a "Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan" region. Which label is used depends on the purpose.

Myth: Everyone in Pakistan speaks Urdu as their first language.

Reality: Urdu is the national language, but in the 2023 census only about 9% of Pakistanis spoke it as their first language. Punjabi (about 37%), Pashto (about 18%), Sindhi (about 14%) and Saraiki (about 12%) are all more common mother tongues. Most Pakistanis learn Urdu as a second language.

Myth: Pashtunwali is a religious law.

Reality: Pashtunwali is a customary code of honor, hospitality and justice that is older than Islam in the region. Most Pashtuns are Muslim and see the two as fitting together, but Pashtunwali comes from tribal custom, not from religious scripture or courts.

Myth: The Taliban and the people of Afghanistan are the same thing.

Reality: The Taliban have governed Afghanistan since August 2021, but Afghans are about 44 million people (2025) of many ethnic groups, languages and opinions, plus millions more in the diaspora. Many Afghans, inside and outside the country, disagree with the government's policies.

Check Yourself

? 1. What are the four provinces of Pakistan and their capitals? ✓

Punjab (Lahore), Sindh (Karachi), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (Peshawar) and Balochistan (Quetta).

? 2. Why is Urdu a good fit as Pakistan's national language, even though few people speak it as a first language? ✓

Because it isn't the home language of any single large province, it belongs to everyone equally and lets Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi, Saraiki and Balochi speakers talk to one another. Article 251 of the constitution names it the national language.

? 3. What are Afghanistan's two official languages, and how are they related to Pakistan? ✓

Dari (a form of Persian) and Pashto. Pashto is also spoken by millions of Pashtuns in Pakistan, especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and northern Balochistan.

? 4. What is melmastia, and which code is it part of? ✓

Melmastia is the duty of generous hospitality to every guest, without expecting anything back. It is one of the main ideas of Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of conduct.

? 5. What happened to the Buddhas of Bamiyan, and when? ✓

The two giant Buddha statues, 55 m and 38 m tall and carved around 1,400 to 1,500 years ago, were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001. The valley became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2003.

Exercises

Remember

1. Name the capitals of Pakistan and Afghanistan and give each country's 2025 population (World Bank).

 Answer

Pakistan: Islamabad, 255,219,554 (about 255 million). Afghanistan: Kabul, 43,844,111 (about 44 million).

2. Which two cities does the Khyber Pass connect, and about how long is the pass?

 Answer

Peshawar in Pakistan and Kabul in Afghanistan. The pass itself runs about 53 km (33 miles) from near Jamrud to the border at Torkham.

Understand

1. Explain why the Punjab Region is called a cultural region rather than a country.

 Answer

The Punjab is an area defined by shared geography (five rivers), language (Punjabi) and culture, not by one government. Since 1947 it has been split between Pakistan's Punjab province and India's Punjab state.

2. Explain why Islamabad was built, and why it is called a planned city.

Answer

Karachi was found unsuitable as the permanent capital, so in 1959 a commission chose a new site near Rawalpindi, and construction began in 1961. It is a planned city because it was designed from scratch with separate zones for government, homes, business and parks.

Apply

1. Use the Country Compare MicroSim. Switch the card to **Pashtun belt** and list four cities inside the shaded area. Then say which country each city is in.

Hint: tap the dots inside the dashed area.

2. A new classmate says her family speaks Saraiki at home and comes from southern Punjab. Using the census table, write two sentences you could say to show you understand where Saraiki fits among Pakistan's languages.

Hint: look at the share of Saraiki speakers and the Punjab province row.

Analyze

1. Compare how the Durand Line and the 1947 line through the Punjab affected the peoples who lived across them. What is similar, and what is different?

Hint: think about language, faith and what each government says about the line today.

2. The Buddhist sites of Taxila, Takht-i-Bahi and Bamiyan are now in two different countries. Analyze what this tells you about the relationship between modern borders and older cultural history.

Hint: think about the roads that connected them.

Evaluate

1. Some people want the Buddhas of Bamiyan rebuilt; others want the empty niches left as a memorial. Which position do you find more convincing, and why? Consider the views of Afghans, Buddhists around the world and historians.

Hint: a strong answer considers at least two points of view before choosing.

2. A news site describes Afghanistan only by its government. Evaluate how fair that is to Afghans, using evidence from Sections 18.6, 18.7 and 18.11.

Hint: think about population, languages, crafts and the diaspora.

Create

1. Design a one-page "welcome guide" for a new student whose family has just moved from Peshawar or Kabul to your town. Include three things your school could do to make them feel at home, using what you learned about hospitality and language.

Hint: melmastia goes both ways.

2. Write a short travel diary (150 to 200 words) from a carpet trader in the 1800s carrying rugs from Kabul through the Khyber Pass to Lahore. Mention at least three real places from this chapter.

Hint: use the MicroSim's road stops to plan the route.

Key Takeaways

- Pakistan, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, became independent on 14 August 1947; it is a federal parliamentary republic with its capital at Islamabad and 255,219,554 people in 2025 (World Bank).
- Pakistan has four provinces, Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan, each with its own main language; more than half of Pakistanis live in Punjab, whose capital is Lahore.
- Urdu is Pakistan's national language, but in the 2023 census only about 9% spoke it first; Punjabi, Pashto, Sindhi and Saraiki are all more common mother tongues.
- Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country of many peoples with 43,844,111 people in 2025 (World Bank); Dari and Pashto are its official languages and Kabul is its capital.
- The Taliban have governed Afghanistan since August 2021; as of October 2026 only Russia formally recognized the government, and girls were barred from secondary school.
- Pashtunwali, the Pashtun code of hospitality, sanctuary, honor, justice and the jirga, is custom, not religious law, and it is shared by Pashtuns on both sides of the Durand Line.
- The Khyber Pass, the Buddhas of Bamiyan and Afghan carpets show how roads, faiths and crafts tied Kabul and Lahore together long before today's border.

You traveled the Khyber road!



You can now find Pakistan's provinces, name Afghanistan's two languages, and explain why a line on a map doesn't stop a culture. Next, in Chapter 19, we head to the far side of South Asia: the river delta of Bangladesh and the island of Sri Lanka.

Quiz: Pakistan and Afghanistan

Test your understanding of Chapter 18. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

What is the capital of Pakistan?

- A. Karachi
- B. Islamabad
- C. Lahore
- D. Peshawar

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Islamabad is a planned capital whose construction began in 1961. Karachi was Pakistan's first capital and is still its largest city, which is why it is a common wrong answer, and Lahore is the capital of Punjab province.

Concept Tested: Islamabad **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

Which two languages are the official national languages of Afghanistan?

- A. Urdu and Pashto

- B. Arabic and Dari
- C. Uzbek and Turkmen
- D. Dari and Pashto

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Dari, the form of Persian spoken in Afghanistan, and Pashto are the country's two official languages. Urdu is Pakistan's national language, and Uzbek and Turkmen were given official status only in regions where most people speak them.

Concept Tested: Dari and Pashto **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Which of the following is NOT one of the four provinces of Pakistan?

- A. Kashmir
- B. Sindh
- C. Balochistan
- D. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Pakistan's four provinces are Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The areas of Kashmir that Pakistan administers (Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir) are part of a disputed region and are not provinces.

Concept Tested: Provinces of Pakistan **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

According to Pakistan's 2023 census, about what share of Pakistanis speak Urdu as their first language?

- A. About 75%
- B. About 37%
- C. About 9%
- D. Less than 1%

Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. Only about 9% of Pakistanis spoke Urdu as their first language in 2023, even though it is the national language. The 37% figure belongs to Punjabi, the most common mother tongue, and the two are easy to mix up.

Concept Tested: Urdu as National Language **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Which statement best describes Pashtunwali?

- A. A religious law written by Islamic scholars and enforced by courts
- B. A traditional, unwritten code of honor, hospitality and justice among Pashtuns
- C. The official constitution of Afghanistan
- D. A style of Pashto poetry sung at weddings

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Pashtunwali is a customary code that is older than Islam in the region and includes hospitality (melmastia), sanctuary, honor, justice and the jirga. Most Pashtuns are Muslim and see the two as fitting together, but Pashtunwali is custom, not religious law.

Concept Tested: Pashtunwali **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Why is the Punjab described as a cultural region rather than as a single country?

- A. Its shared language and culture span Pakistan's Punjab province and India's Punjab state, which were split in 1947.
- B. It is a separate country that has not yet been recognized.
- C. It is a province of Afghanistan with its own language.
- D. It is only a river, not a place where people live.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. The Punjab, the "land of five waters," shares the Punjabi language and much culture on both sides of the 1947 line, even though it is governed by two countries. It is not a country of its own, and it is not part of Afghanistan.

Concept Tested: Punjab Region **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Ben reads a headline that says "Afghanistan, in the Middle East..." Using the chapter, what is the most accurate way to correct it?

- A. Afghanistan is in East Asia, next to China.
- B. Afghanistan has a coastline on the Persian Gulf, so it is in the Middle East.
- C. Afghanistan is part of India.
- D. Afghanistan is a landlocked country where South Asia meets Central Asia and Iran; it belongs to SAARC, though some groupings place it differently.

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. Afghanistan is a SAARC member, which is why this book counts it as South Asian, and some scholars group it with Central Asia. It is landlocked, so it has no Persian Gulf coast, and it has never been part of India.

Concept Tested: Afghanistan **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

A trader in the 1800s wants to carry carpets from Kabul to Lahore by the old road. Which order of places would she pass through?

- A. Kabul, Kandahar, Quetta, Karachi, Lahore
- B. Kabul, Bamiyan, Jam, Lahore
- C. Kabul, Jalalabad, the Khyber Pass, Peshawar, Lahore
- D. Kabul, Islamabad, Peshawar, the Khyber Pass, Lahore

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. The old road ran east from Kabul down to Jalalabad, through the Khyber Pass to Peshawar, and across the Punjab plain to Lahore. Option D puts the stops in the wrong order (the Khyber Pass comes before Peshawar when traveling from Kabul), and Islamabad did not exist until the 1960s.

Concept Tested: Khyber Pass **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

The Buddhist sites of Taxila and Takht-i-Bahi (in Pakistan) and Bamiyan (in Afghanistan) belong to the same Gandharan art world. What does this best suggest?

- A. Pakistan and Afghanistan were always one country.
- B. Old trade roads connected communities long before today's border existed, so shared culture crosses the modern line.
- C. Buddhism is the main religion of both countries today.
- D. The sites were built recently to attract tourists.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. These sites grew along the same roads, such as the route through the Khyber Pass, centuries before the Durand Line was drawn in 1893. Today both countries are overwhelmingly Muslim, and the sites are many centuries old.

Concept Tested: Buddhas of Bamiyan **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

Turkmen carpets are mostly red with repeated motifs called guls, while Baluch carpets are more colorful and often include floral designs. What does this comparison show about Afghan carpets?

- A. All Afghan carpets look the same.
- B. Afghan carpets are made only in factories.
- C. Afghan carpets are traditionally woven only by men in big cities.
- D. Different communities have their own weaving traditions, so a carpet's style can point to the people who made it.

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **D**. Afghan carpet weaving was traditionally done by women of groups like the Turkmen and Baluch, and each group's style is different; Turkmen gul patterns were even linked to particular clans. So carpets were not made only by men in cities: most weavers were women, often in herding communities.

Concept Tested: Afghan Carpets **Bloom's Level:** Analyze