

USAID/Afghanistan
A note on
AFGHAN ETIQUETTES AND GENERAL FACTS
for the use of expatriates in Afghanistan

Compiled by the USAID FSN Staff

A) GENERAL ETIQUETTES OF AFGHAN CULTURE

Meeting and Greeting

- When meeting someone the handshake is the most common form on greeting. You will also see people place their hands over their hearts and nod slightly.
- Prior to engaging in business, one should always enquire about things like a person's health, business, family, etc.
- Women and men will not shake hands; however, if initiated by woman, there is no problem.
- Women and men may shake hands and be left alone to speak directly to each other if they are Muharram¹ to one another.

Mixing Between Genders

- Free mixing between genders only takes place within families and close relatives.
- In professional situations such as at businesses or universities, males and females may be co-workers, but are nevertheless cautious to maintain each other's honor.
- If a man speaks to a woman directly in a social context (not in the office), he is dishonoring her. If a man speaks to a women on the street, that is equally inappropriate.
- On the other hand, foreign men should note that it is inappropriate to initiate social conversation with an Afghan woman, and a foreign man should not ask an Afghan man about his wife or female relatives.
- Unless married, men and women should never touch one another under any circumstances.
- If you happen to take photo of a female afghan, seek permission before you do so.

Gift Giving Etiquette

- First rule of gift giving is to never offer alcoholic drinks. However, if you know from first hand experience that the receiver drinks you may do so but covertly to avoid shame.
- The first time you go to someone's house for tea, it is optional to bring a small gift.
- If you are invited to lunch or dinner, feel free but you don't have to, bring fruit, sweets or pastries. Make sure the box is wrapped nicely. *(This applies in most cases, but not in all).*
- When bringing a gift, be subtle in how it is given. Do not immediately give the present but rather discreetly place it near the door or where you sit down.

¹ Muharram means: close member of the family (husband, father, brother, and uncles)

- When it comes to wrapping gifts there is no special protocol. Green is good for weddings.

Dining Etiquette

- Dining in Afghanistan is a different experience (as compared to the western world) and there are many differences in etiquette. That should be observed.
- Always remove your shoes at the door if visiting a home. (It is advisable for both men and women to have one pair of slip-on shoes.)
- When you go to an Afghan home, wait in the gate until you are asked to come in.
- Do not engage female members of a house hold unless asked.
- If you need to use the restroom, someone will direct you. If you would like to visit other rooms of the house seek permission first.
- Wash your hands before eating.
- If eating at someone's home, you will be seated on the floor, usually on cushions.
- Food is served on plastic or vinyl tablecloths spread on the floor.
- Wait to be shown where to sit.
- If you can, sit cross-legged. Otherwise sit as comfortably as you can. Do not sit with legs outstretched and your feet facing people.
- Food is generally served communally and everyone will share from the same dish.
- Do not eat with the left hand. (If you are not left handed)
- Always pass and receive things using your right hand.
- Food is eaten with the hands and by watching Afghans you will be able to learn. Usually food is scooped up into a ball at the tip of the fingers, and then eaten.
- Leave food on your plate, if you are full, otherwise, it will be filled up again.

B) BUSINESS ETIQUETTE

Business Cards

- Business cards are not widely used in Afghanistan. They therefore carry a sense of importance and prestige.
- If you are given a business card, take it respectfully and study it so that they see that you are spending time considering their credentials. Comment on it and any qualifications the giver may have.
- There is no real protocol used for exchanging cards except to use your right hand.
- It may be a good idea to have your card translated into Dari or Pashtu.

What to Wear

- Men should wear conservative suits and shoes. If working in the country in a non-commercial capacity, then wearing the traditional Afghan dress (long shirt and trousers) is best.
- Women should always dress up modestly and conservatively and have headscarf while in public.

Business Meetings

- Business is very much personal in Afghanistan. If you have not already invested some quality time in getting to know your counterparts, then you must use initial meetings to establish trust.
- Once this has been accomplished, you can move on to the nitty-gritty of business.
- Do not be surprised or offended if during meetings people walk in and out of a room or phone calls are taken.
- If the meeting involves a group of people it will be led by a person who will set the agenda, the content, and the pace of the activities.
- Meetings are usually held to communicate information and decisions that have already been made rather than a forum for discussion and brain storming.
- Meeting schedules are not very structured. Start times and points of discussion are all fluid and flexible. Be prepared for a lot of tangents in the discussions.
- Afghani communication style is rather indirect. It is therefore sometimes necessary to read between the lines for an answer rather than expect it to be explicitly stated.
- Honor and shame should always be considered. Always express yourself in a way that is not direct or pins blame on someone. Never make accusations or speak down to anyone.
- It is not appropriate to pass gas and blow nose in front of Afghans. If you must blow your nose, leave the table.
- Don't sleep or doze off in public, if you are jet lagged, give an apology.

C) RELIGION (ISLAM)

- Islam is practiced by the majority of Afghans and governs much of their personal, political, economic and legal lives.
- Among certain obligations for Muslims are to pray five times a day – at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening.
- It is recommended that prayers are performed in the mosque, but if not possible, it can be performed any where that is clean.
- During the holy month of Ramadan all Muslims must fast from dawn to dusk. Fasting includes no eating, drinking, cigarette smoking, or gum chewing.
- During the holy month of Ramadan, Afghans usually work six hours daily (there is no restriction, by religion, if they work more or less).
- Foreigners are advised not to eat, drink, smoke, or chew gum in public.
- Afghans are sensitive about their religion, speaking to them negatively about their religion makes them unhappy.

D) ON THE CAFÉ/EMBASSY (DOs and DON'Ts)

DOs:

- Most of the FSNs perform the noon and the afternoon prayers in the office; they should be allowed time to do so.
- In the FSN cafeteria, male and females are served and eat separately. If you want to eat food there, consider this please.
- Exchange greetings with someone passing by you. If greeted respond in a similar fashion.

DON'Ts:

- Please do not eat and drink in public during the month of Ramadan. (morning – evening)
- Culturally it is not acceptable to shake hands with female FSNs if not initiated by themselves. It is ok for a female to initiate a handshake with another female.
- It is not advisable to touch female FSNs under any circumstances. It is ok for a female to touch a female.
- Culturally it is not good to pass gas or blow nose in front of Afghans.
- It is culturally inappropriate to walk in front of someone while he or she is praying.
- It is also inappropriate to use curse words in conversations with FSNs.
- It is advisable to make sure that meeting schedules (with the Afghan government senior officials) do not touch prayer times.

E) SOME GENERAL FACTS

Ethnic and Tribal Make-up: Afghanistan is ethnically a diverse country which consists of Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Aimak, Turkmen, Baloch, and others.

Religion Make-up: Sunni Muslim 80%; Shi'a Muslim 19%; Other 1%;
“<http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/resources/global-etiquette/afghanistan.html>”

Languages: Pashto and Dari are the main languages widely spoken by people of this country.

Unique Functions Of The Government:

- The Supreme Court is the highest structure of justice in Afghanistan.
- The Ulema² Council is a religious independent body in the country. This body is comprised of representatives from the provincial Ulema Councils. The major

² Ulema: is referred to the religious scholars

responsibility of the body is to discuss religious issues at the country level and release the final Fetwahs³. This body is not connected to the Supreme Court.

- All mosques throughout the country are connected to the Ministry of Religious Affairs.
- Revenues are collected in the provinces and sent to the central government. Provinces do not retain any of their tax revenues.
- All the Governors are appointed by the president.
- Currently all mayors are appointed by the president. In the future elections are planned but no date has been set.

Political Parties: Political parties in Afghanistan can be generally divided into the following categories:

- Jihadis (formed during the Jihad period and members are Mujahidden, people are from religious cities and rural areas).
- Leftists (formed prior to the Jihad and members are former Communists and Maoists)
- Democrats (formed after the fall of Taliban)

There are around 100 political parties registered with Ministry of Justice, but only some – approx. 10- of these are really active, followed in the media and have support of a significant segment of the population. Of these, the following six are the strongest:

- Jamiat-e-Islami, an old Jihadi party, led by Rabbani (currently member of the Parliament and formerly President of Afghanistan)
Note: Other prominent members- Mohammad Ismael Khan (currently Minister of Energy and formerly Governor of Herat province), and Atta Mohammad (currently Governor of Balkh province and formerly head of the Balkh military court).
- Wahdat-e-Islami Khalili, a Shiite old Jihadi party, led by Khalili (currently Vice President and formerly a political activist)
- Wahdat-e-Islami Mardoom-e-Afghanistan, a Shiite Jihadi party, led by Mohammad Mohaqiq (currently a Member of Parliament and formerly Minister of Planning).
- Harakt-e-Islami, a Shiite old Jihadi party, led by Saeed Ali Javid (a political activist)
- Hezb-e-Dawat-e-Islami (formally called Ittehad-e Islami) led by Rasool Sayyaf (currently a Member of Parliament and formally a political activist)
- Afghan Millat party, led by Dr. Anwar-ul-Haq Ahady (Minister of Finance)

³ Fetwah: is religious adjudication made by the religious scholars. Only a (Muftee) is entitled to do so. A Muftee is a religious scholar, who is religiously authorized to adjudicate.

- National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan (Hizb-e-Junbish-e-Melli-e-Islami Afghanistan) Led by Sayed Noorullah (formerly Director of Foreign Affairs of Balkh province).

Note: This party was led by Abdul Rashid Dostum. Dostum officially stepped down on April 18, 2005 to take up a post (Chief of Staff to the Commander of the Armed Forces) in President Hamid Karzai's government. Dostum was appointed by Karzai on March 1, 2005. Dostum was a former Communist General who switched sides to help the Mujahideen bring down Dr. Najibullah's Russian supported government.

- **President Hamid Karzai has no party**, because he thinks that political parties does not have a good reputation among the people in Afghanistan and therefore, he does not want to be associated with any party.

Only 8-10 parties have representative in the parliament, the rest of the parties were excluded due to the Single Non Transferable Vote system (SNTV). The government has no fund for political parties and according to the law; no party can receive any fund from foreign sources. Very few women are in the hierarchy of political parties; they are not in decision making level.

Most of the parties have similar constitution, but all of them suffer from the lack of strategy.

F) SOME BASIC PHRASES

English phrases

- Hello!
- How are you?
- How is your health?
- How is your family?
- Glad to meet you.
- See you tomorrow.
- Goodbye.
- Thanks.

Dari pronunciation

- Salaam!
- Che Tawr Hasten?
- Sehat-e-Shuma Khoob Has?
- Famil-e-taan Che Tawr Has?
- Az mulaaqaat baa shuma khosh hastam.
- Taa Fardaa Khuda Hafez
- (Khuda Hafez!) And (Khuda Negahdaar!)
- Tashakur