

Faith institutions and community groups' guide

Working alongside Afghan refugees

BY BETHANY CHRISTIAN SERVICES





INTRODUCTION

Bethany's mission is to demonstrate the love and compassion of Jesus Christ by protecting children, empowering youth, and strengthening families through quality social services. As part of this mission, we have served thousands of refugees from countries all over the world. In 2020 alone, Bethany directly served 5,579 and impacted a total of 12,297 refugees and immigrants. Our current effort to help Afghan refugees is a continuation of that work.

Refugees are survivors, asylum seekers, and families escaping violence. Refugees deserve to be loved and empowered, and that's what we seek to provide. We've been working alongside refugees since 1975, partnering with local churches, volunteers, and service providers to ensure refugees experience a safe and smooth transition. Our faith calls us to care for refugees. With your help, we can guide and protect them as they build their new lives.

For refugees fleeing danger, the resettlement process can be extremely challenging. And too often, people become numbers in a system that can feel impossible to navigate. That's why we guide, advocate, protect, and support refugees in key resettlement locations around the globe, including the U.S.

As we look to come alongside Afghans newly arriving in the U.S., it's important to ask ourselves:

- How does my perspective differ from theirs?
- Am I making any assumptions?
- What actions can I take to make them feel safe, loved, and empowered?
- What do I need to learn about Afghan culture, language, and history to better serve them?

The Afghan population is highly diverse in terms of food preferences, languages, and other cultural practices. The information provided in this guide is not meant to replace conversations with people about their needs and preferences; rather, its purpose is to assist community volunteers and faith groups as they build relationships with Afghan individuals and families. Within each section of this guide are tips to help you provide a warm welcome to our new Afghan neighbors.



CONTENTS

Introduction	2
Languages and ethnicities	4
Names	5
Family and values	6
Religion	7
Halal food	9
Common celebrations and religious holidays	10
Trauma	12

Sources:

Brittanica

Translators Without Borders

Diplomatic Language Services

Culture Orientation

Wikipedia



LANGUAGES AND ETHNICITIES

Afghanistan is a multiethnic and multilingual country. Ethnic groups are comprised of various cultures and have adopted traditions and celebrations from each other. The proper term for a person who is native to, or an inhabitant of Afghanistan is Afghan. The term Afghani refers to the unit of Afghan currency and should not be used to refer to people.

With over 40 languages spoken in Afghanistan, multilingualism is common, and there is not always an exact correlation of language to ethnic group. Pashto and Dari (sometimes known as Afghan Persian or Farsi) are the official and most spoken languages in Afghanistan. Approximately 77% of people in Afghanistan speak Dari and 48% speak Pashto. Approximately 6% of people in Afghanistan speak English.

When seeking interpretation and translation services, it is important to note there are many dialects of the languages an Afghan may speak. Dari and Farsi are often considered two accents of the same language; however, local usage may vary.

Give a warm welcome

- Ensure you connect with staff to discuss interpretation needs, especially when decisions need to be made that will impact the person and their family. Bethany has several interpreters who can provide services to Afghans and staff can help find additional language services as needed.
- When an interpreter is not available, use an interpretation or translation app.
- Try to learn common words and phrases in the language of the person or arrival.



NAMES

Typically, Afghans don't have last names; traditionally, they use only first names. The western notion of a first and last name is so ingrained that Afghan first names (which happen to be double names similar to Mary Jane or John Mark) are frequently interpreted as first and last. It is polite to ask individuals what they prefer to be called. For example, an individual named Mohammed Abdullah may prefer to be identified as "Abdullah." Or an individual named Ilias Ahmed may prefer to be called "Ilias." Afghans who have contact with the western world typically adopt a last name or have one adopted for them.

Give a warm welcome

- Ask what they prefer to be called and ensure you pronounce their name the same way they do.
- Let everyone know how they can address you and other volunteers present.



FAMILY AND VALUES

Afghan households are generally large and multigenerational. The family is the single most important aspect of life in Afghanistan. Family roles vary between ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, and regions. Most family structures are traditionally patriarchal, with the eldest man recognized as the leader of the rest.

In some, but not all, Afghan families (particularly those from rural areas) women and girls may not be allowed to speak if a man of the family is present. More commonly, children and youth are not allowed to speak without permission if an elder is present.

A key difference between Afghan and American mainstream cultures is that the latter stresses the independence of the individual while the former emphasizes the individual's dependence on the family. Respect for their individual and family choices is key in working with Afghan populations. Engaging in conversations with them regarding their choices is preferred over telling them what they need to do. Afghan children, in particular, may not be used to communicating their preferences. It may be helpful to gently remind them it is okay for them to share their ideas and feelings with you.

Modesty is very important within Islam. Most Muslims attempt to behave and dress modestly to be judged on their intelligence, skills, and contributions instead of their physical attributes.

Practices of modesty in appearance may include men wearing beards or small head coverings and women wearing loose-fitting, non-revealing clothing with a hair, neck, and/or body covering (hijab or headscarf). Some women choose to cover their face.

Other practices of modesty following puberty are "lowering of the gaze," avoidance of shaking hands, and avoidance of seclusion with the opposite sex. None of these practices should be seen as acts of insult, offense, or discrimination. Sensitivity and understanding should be shown to Muslim children in the way they interact (or do not interact) with other children of the opposite gender, or the way they act (or do not interact) with a volunteer or staff of the opposite gender. When interacting with a child of another gender, volunteers should avoid touching the child.

Give a warm welcome

- Follow the person's lead in terms of interactions and do not take it personally if they prefer not to shake hands, make eye contact, or be alone with you.
- Most importantly, let them know you are open to hearing their opinions and feedback on what they need from you.



RELIGION

Most Afghans practice Islam, an Abrahamic monotheistic religion teaching that Muhammad is a messenger of God. It is the world's second-largest religion with 1.9 billion followers—or 24.9% of the world's population—known as Muslims. Muslims make up a majority of the population in 47 countries. Islam teaches that God is merciful, all-powerful, and unique, and has guided humanity through prophets, revealed scriptures, and natural signs. The primary scriptures of Sunni Islam are the Quran, believed to be the verbatim word of God, and the teachings and normative examples (called the sunnah, composed of accounts called hadith) of Muhammad. Shia Muslims, at times a persecuted minority in Afghanistan, follow the Quran and the teachings of the sunnah as well as the last Caliph Ali and his descendants.

Many Afghans who have resettled in the U.S. have practiced a sect of Islam called Shia Islam, but Sunni Islam is more representative of the overall population in Afghanistan. When working with individuals from the different sects within Islam, it is important to have open communication to understand their preferences for practicing

their religion and who they wish to be in community with, as values and practices may vary. Influences are ethnic, geographic, and religious and a single approach to religion is not suitable for all Muslims.

The Five Pillars of Islam are: Testimony of Faith, Five Daily Prayers, Annual Obligatory Charity, Fasting During the Month of Ramadan, and A Pilgrimage (Hajj) to Mecca.

To support Muslim Afghans, it is important to be aware of the five daily prayer times and the requirements prior to prayer. Before praying, Muslims must perform ablution, called “Wudu,” which includes washing their hands, face, arms, feet, and rinsing mouths and nostrils with water. Muslims are also required to cleanse themselves with water after using the toilet, so having small plastic water bottles available in restrooms in foster homes is helpful. Prayers are usually performed on a prayer rug in a clean/quiet place, lasting 10-15 minutes, and facing Mecca (usually northeast in the U.S.). Prayer times vary as they depend on the rising and setting of the sun, so assisting children with finding local prayer schedules (via an online search, phone prayer time apps, or checking with a local mosque) is helpful.



Give a warm welcome

Remember that even within the same religion, everyone practices their faith differently.

- Prepare to be open to new religious practices.
- Support their prayer by downloading the app Qibla Finder, marking the correct direction to face during prayer times and providing prayer times (as discussed previously).
- Discuss the individual or family's prayer preferences, then explore opportunities for them to pray in a private place, if desired.
- If a bidet is not available, provide a small plastic water bottle to keep in the bathroom for them to cleanse themselves.
- Understand how pets, especially dogs, are viewed by most Muslims. Expect most Muslims to have a natural discomfort around dogs as it is typically prohibited for Muslims to keep dogs as pets, with a few exceptions such as guard, guide, and hunting dogs.
- Identify mosques in your area and whether they are in the Shia or Sunni branch. Do not take a newly arrived person to a mosque until you have clearly communicated with them about this through an interpreter familiar with Islam.
- Provide information and opportunities for them to attend Jummah (Friday congregational prayer), if desired.



HALAL FOOD

“Halal” means permissible or lawful. Halal food meets the Islamic dietary guidelines (animals both raised and slaughtered humanely) and is similar to Jewish law regarding kosher food. Muslims typically do not consume alcohol, pork, animals not slaughtered properly, blood/blood byproducts, carnivorous animals, or birds of prey. If halal meat is not available, seafood or vegetarian meals may be used as substitutes. You may also search online for restaurants or stores near you that sell halal meats.

Staple foods in Afghanistan include Basmati rice and soft, fresh flat bread (a variation of naan). Common meats are chicken and lamb. Most Afghans do not eat pork, and beef is not a staple food. Many dishes are cooked with lots of tomato, onion, cardamom, salt, and oil. Fruit and nuts are familiar snacks.

Tea is the preferred beverage, though some drink coffee. Green tea prepared with a variety of ingredients, such as saffron, cinnamon, and cardamom is known as Kahwa. This is often served several times a day with sugar or honey and a sprinkling of crushed nuts. These drinks are often taken with a biscuit-like cookie, similar to Digestives. Fresh fruit juices or whole milk are common for breakfast. Most Afghans do not drink alcohol.

Mealtimes are communal. It may be considered rude to start eating when any member of the family is missing from the table. A household does not start a meal until everyone in the home is at the table together, regardless of how long it takes for them to gather.

Give a warm welcome

- Identify local halal (typically Indian, Arabic, or Somali-owned) stores and restaurants near you that sell familiar food and drink. Share these resources with Afghan arrivals or offer to take them to the store/restaurant.
- If purchasing or preparing food, ensure it is culturally appropriate and familiar to them (see the list above for ideas). If you will be hosting an Afghan individual or family, ensure an assortment of tea, fruit, biscuit-cookies, and rice is available in your home upon their arrival.
- Remember that finding foods that foster children like requires trial and error. Involving the child in decisions about meals whenever possible can provide them an opportunity to feel empowered and lessen the impact of culture shock. If there is something they don't like about the meal, invite them to be specific about what could be changed.



COMMON CELEBRATIONS AND RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS

One of the most important aspects of holiday celebrations for Afghans is being with their families and community. Vital components of the celebrations include congregational prayers, family visits, exchanging gifts during Eid, and enjoying special meals and celebration. For Afghan families, purchasing gifts during Eid is very important, as this would be similar to American children celebrating Christmas by exchanging gifts.

Main holidays celebrated in Afghanistan:

- Nauruz—follows Afghan New Year
- Eid ul-Fit—celebrated after the last day of Ramadan; lasts three days
- Eid ul-Adha—celebrated on the tenth day of the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar; coincides with the Hajj and lasts four days
- Ashura—occurs the first month of the Islamic calendar

Ramadan is the ninth month in the Islamic calendar and observed by Muslims worldwide as a month of fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. The observance of Ramadan is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam. It is critical to respect and honor the requirements for Ramadan if you work with youth in foster care or families through resettlement. Ask individuals what their preferences and needs are during this important tradition. While there are some exceptions, most individuals fast from sunrise to sunset every day of the month of Ramadan and are not permitted to eat, drink (not even water), smoke, or have sexual relations while observing Ramadan. Muslims break their fast right at sunset for an evening meal called Iftar.

Give a warm welcome

- Purchase a Solar Hijri calendar for your home (the one traditionally used in Afghanistan) to keep track of celebrations and other significant dates.
- Talk about which holidays they observe and how they celebrate them. Using the information provided above as a starting place, work together to identify ways to celebrate holidays.
- Know that holiday celebrations may be bittersweet as they grapple with being apart from loved ones and observing holidays differently than how they are accustomed.





TRAUMA

Some of the most pressing challenges for the Afghan individuals we work with include the physical and psychological aftermath of war. We can expect to see high rates of PTSD among the Afghan arrivals to our programs. Possible behaviors include frustration, anger, aggression, resistance to rules, withdrawal, apathy, and an unwillingness to talk about the future.

It is important to be present to whatever behaviors arise and to be gentle, clear, and open in all communication. Eventually, the goal can be to channel energy toward positive goals through communities and programs that provide a support system to counteract the intense loss they have experienced.

It is important that new arrivals are involved in decisions that impact their lives. Ensure participation, feedback, and complaint mechanisms are integrated in all strategies and plans from the start. Decisions and actions should be responsive to the expressed priorities, needs, capacities, and views of everyone involved. Connectivity and participation are not luxuries, but rather lifelines for refugees.

In a crisis, people of every age, gender, and demographic need to be able to communicate with friends and family. For refugees, this means people in their country of origin and their country of flight. Try to assist by providing opportunities for them to connect with loved ones with whom they were separated. It is also important they have access to a local Afghan community. Participation in their community here will help to heal the loss they are actively experiencing.



Give a warm welcome

- Equip yourself with trauma-informed care training and psychological first aid training; Psychological First Aid for Unaccompanied Children | The National Child Traumatic Stress Network ([nctsn.org](https://www.nctsn.org))
- Avoid making assumptions about what decisions are best for the individuals you work with. Include them in decisions and ask for their opinions and feedback regularly.
- Become informed about Afghan and Muslim communities near you and connect with them to provide information and opportunities for relationships with the families and children you work with.



**Thank you for supporting Afghans
resettling into our communities!**

**Together, we can change the world
through family.**



901 Eastern Ave NE, PO Box 294
Grand Rapids, MI 49501
Bethany.org

**For more information
(800) BETHANY**