

# Afghanistan - Nuristanis

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## Profile

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Nuristanis arrived in Afghanistan fleeing the eastward spread of Islam. They speak a unique Indo-European language. Nuristanis were conquered by Amir Abdur Rahman Khan in 1895-96 and were obliged to abandon their ancient religious belief in favour of Islam. They reside mainly in the east of the country – between the Pashtun tribes of Kunar, Kalash in Pakistan's Chitral, and Tajiks of Badakhshan in the north. Nuristan (land of light) is located on the southern slope of the Hindu Kush mountain range and is spread over four valleys, with each valley having its own distinct language/dialect: Kati, Waigali, Ashkun and Parsun.

Nuristan has very little arable land, the vast majority of the territory being covered by forest. The main base of the economy is animal husbandry – mostly goat-herding. While maize and barley are grown in small quantities, the Nuristani people survive mainly on subsistence agriculture, wheat, fruit and goats. Very few Nuristanis have had access to education. Yet, among those who have travelled to Kabul and been able to gain access to schools, some have gained prominence as well-known figures in the army and the government in Kabul.

## Historical context

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The Nuristanis' scattered settlement is another result of Amir Abdul Rahman's late-nineteenth-century expansionism. During his rule, what was then called Kafiristan (Kafir meaning infidel as Nuristanis did not convert to Islam until the twentieth century) was renamed as Nuristan ('land of light') after the forced Islamization of the tribe. Nuristanis are still sometimes referred to as 'Kafir'. Some Nuristanis claim to be descendants of Alexander the Great.

Nuristani men and women follow a strict division of labour with the men working in livestock herding while the women work on grain production or irrigated terraces.

The province was the scene of some of the heaviest guerrilla fighting during the 1979-89

Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. Nuristan is still used as a route by Taliban and al-Qaeda into North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of Pakistan.

## Current issues

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The Afghan Constitution (2004) recognizes Nuristanis as one of the national minorities entitled to Afghan citizenship. However, Nuristan remains isolated and poverty-stricken and due to the lack of regional institutions there is a widespread lawlessness. The 2004 presidential elections and foreign aid have had little impact on the region. The lack of security and central government presence has caused development aid to cease in the region. Afghan Aid was the last operational NGO in Nuristan which ceased work after an armed attack on its offices in 2005. Poverty and health problems are of major concern in Nuristan, with diseases such as tuberculosis rife along with malnutrition, maternal and infant mortality. Every household is reported to have malnourished members – inevitably these are usually the women and children.

Mass killings, extortion, drug trafficking and forced displacement of the Nuristanis are still widespread. The lack of governance and the rule of law in the region have intensified the power of local militia and conservative religious leaders. The latter have declared TV and radio to be against Islam and have forced some local schools to turn girls away.