

New Rochelle Reads

Literature Festival 2005

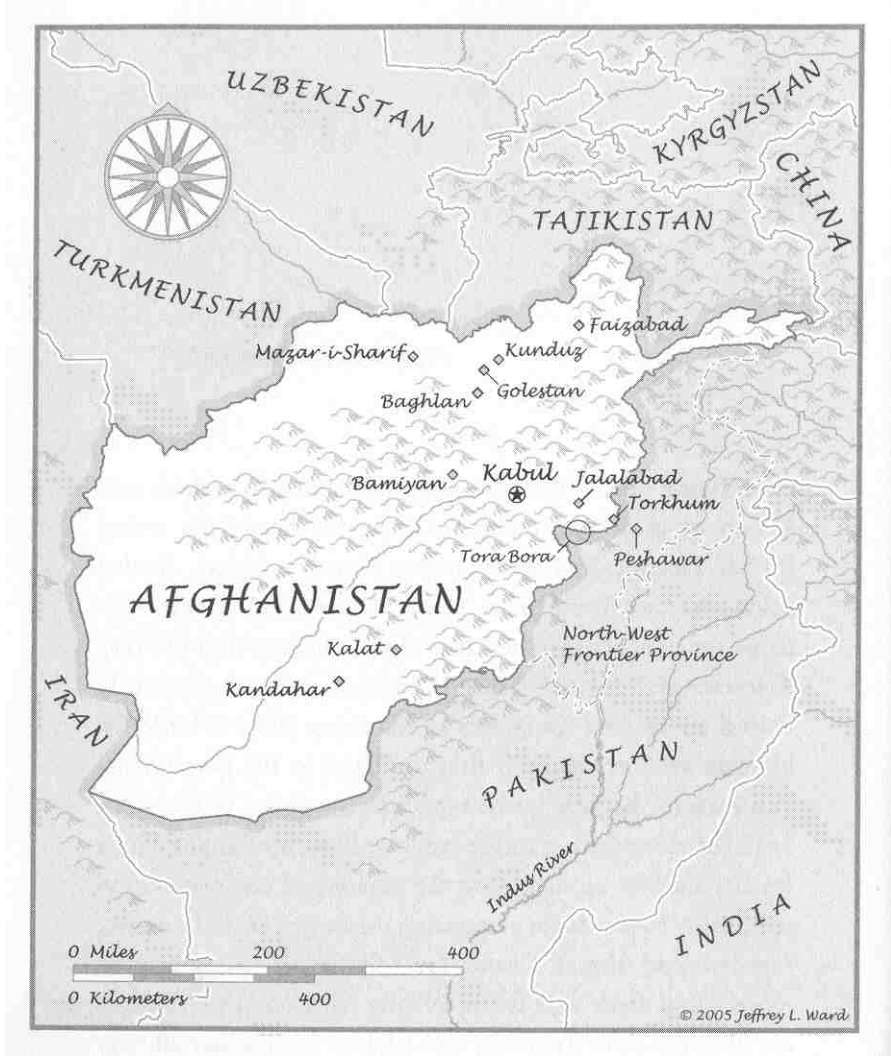
Under the Persimmon Tree
by Suzanne Fisher Staples

A Reader's Guide

Created by
Ellen Mastro and
Laurie Marinaro



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READS
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Isaac E. Young Middle School

“New Rochelle Reads” Literature Festival

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A Reader’s Guide

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About the Author

Suzanne Fisher Staples was born in 1945 and grew up in the farmlands near Scranton, Pennsylvania. She worked as a newspaper reporter in Asia for twelve years, traveling through Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka with the United Press International. She also worked in Washington, DC as an editor at *The Washington Post*. It is during this extensive travel and experience that Staples acquired her vast knowledge of the people and culture of the Muslim world.

After many years of working as a newspaper reporter, she decided to change careers and become a writer. Her life as a reporter was very arduous, chaotic, and unpredictable. She much preferred the life of books to articles. Staples proclaims, “I grew up loving books. My grandmother read to us everyday and bribed us with stories to help her in her rock garden. There among the bleeding hearts, and irises and peonies, I decided I wanted to be a writer. I’ve always written: journals, letters, school newspapers, essays, and when I grew up, news reports.” She never imagined herself writing a novel, though. She doubted she could ever write a book that would sustain anyone’s interest.

However, that all changed when she visited Pakistan. She fell in love with the ancient stories, the blue-tiled mosques, and the people who built shrines where beautiful poems were composed. There was also something about the ignorance in the West about Islamic people that motivated her to write stories that dispelled divisive prejudices. Her first attempt at her new writing career began with Shabanu and Haveli.

When she left Pakistan, she wondered whether she would ever find anything that sparked inspiration as the people of Cholistan Desert. She found such a place in Virginia’s Eastern Shore. She settled in a small, beautiful space on the Chesapeake Bay, where she was able to create imaginative and complex characters. She decided to infuse her books with the theme of tolerance, especially illuminated in Dangerous Skies, because of her belief in the beauty of diversity, and also common elements of all cultures that make us one people despite our geography.

Suzanne Fisher Staples believes in the wonder and awesome nature of the world. She will never cease to be touched by places and people who give her ideas for stories. She believes stories are the most important thing in the world because ultimately, they teach us how to live, love and find magic wherever we are.

--Summarized by Filomena Daniele

As You Read

Although they are technically the same person, Nusrat and Elaine are two very different characters. As you read, fill in the chart below describing aspects of Nusrat and Elaine's character. After completing the chart, note the similarities and differences between Nusrat and Elaine.

Aspects of Character	Nusrat	Elaine
Religion		
Clothing		
Language		
Profession		
Social Life		
Love Life		
Family Relationships		
Location		
Living Environment		

As You Read

Readers may learn about and analyze character by paying attention to the following as they read:

1. **Actions:** the way a character behaves.
2. **Appearance:** the way a character looks, including clothing, hairstyle.
3. **Speech:** the way a character talks, including language, accent, and word choice.
4. **Thoughts:** the things a character is thinking in his/her mind.
5. **What other characters think or say about the character.**

As you read Najmah's story, chart the changes in her character. Be sure to note the chapter in which the change occurs.

Aspect of Characterization	Change in Character	Chapter in which the Change Occurs
Actions		
Appearance		
Speech		
Thoughts		
What Other Characters Think or Say		

As You Read

This novel alternates the narrative between the stories of Najmah and Nusrat. How are their narratives connected? Be sure to note examples of events, messages of the narratives, among other connections.

Chapters	Connections
Chapters 1 & 2	
Chapters 3 & 4	
Chapters 5 & 6	
Chapters 7 & 8	
Chapters 9 & 10	
Chapters 11 & 12	
Chapters 13/14 & 15	

Chapter One

Vocabulary

- 1) **Heft** – to lift up something heavy, especially with a burst of effort
- 2) **Skewers** – thin rod to cook food on
- 3) **Parched** – completely lacking in moisture because of hot conditions or lack of rainfall
- 4) **Nuzzles** – to rub or push something gently with the nose, especially as a way of showing affection
- 5) **Hub** – the central part of a wheel or a similar rotating device such as a propeller

Motivation

Complete the chart by comparing and contrasting your morning routine to Najmah’s morning routine. How are you like Najmah within your differences?

My Morning Routine	Similarities	Najmah’s Morning Routine

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Identify the following characters presented in chapter one: Mada-jan, Baba-jan, Nur, Habib, Najmah.
- 2) Describe the daily jobs each character completes to maintain the well being of the family.
- 3) In the “Author’s Note,” the author explains that the village of Golestan is fictional. What does “fictional” mean?
- 4) Locate information pertaining to the weather in Golestan. How has the weather impacted the lives of the people?
- 5) Imagine the setting. Write words or draw images of the place this family calls home.
- 6) Why does Najmah fear going to fetch the wood? Why does she put her fear aside?

- 7) List the foods the family eats. How is this diet the same and/or different from yours?
- 8) What has Baba-jan taught his children about the stars in the sky?
- 9) Why does Baba-jan believe the stars are important?
- 10) What is the significance of Najmah's name? What might her name foreshadow about her path in the future?
- 11) Describe the government in Afghanistan.
- 12) How do the Taliban and the Pashtun talib treat the people of Afghanistan?
- 13) What does the Taliban forbid? Why do you think they will not allow these things?
- 14) When the Taliban come to the family's home, what and who is taken away?
- 15) Why does Baba-jan insist that Mada-jan and Najmah remain on the family's land?

Extension Questions

- 1) Mada-jan considers Najmah to be "a good and brave girl". Do you agree or disagree at this point? How does Najmah feel about the comment?
- 2) Which Taliban rule would be most challenging for you to follow?
- 3) Do some research! How did the Taliban come to rule in Afghanistan?
- 4) Why does Najmah consider the Taliban "human leopards"?
- 5) In what ways is the drought symbolic of life under the Taliban?
- 6) Now that her father and brother are gone, make predictions about Najmah's role in the home.

Chapter Two

Vocabulary

- 1) **Affluent** – having an abundance of material wealth
- 2) **Rickshaw** – a small vehicle with two wheels and a seat for passengers, pulled along by somebody walking in front of it
- 3) **Seldom** – rarely; not often
- 4) **Settee** – a comfortable seat for two or more people, with a cushioned back and arms
- 5) **Knead** – work dough until smooth
- 6) **Lurid** – sensational and shocking, with graphic details of horror, devastation, or violence

Motivation

Imagine you were asked to wear a uniform as a school requirement. How might that influence your behavior? Why? How might the uniform make you feel? Why?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How is Nusrat similar to the people of Peshawar? How is she different?
- 2) Who does Nusrat go to visit?

- 3) Describe her relationship with Asma. Use details from the text to support your response.
- 4) What happened to Nusrat's real sister?
- 5) How might this tragedy have influenced Nusrat's feelings toward Asma?
- 6) How does Nusrat react to Jamshed's news? Why does she react this way?
- 7) Who is Faiz? Where has he gone? Why?
- 8) How did the events of September 11th change Nusrat's life?
- 9) Why do you think Nusrat says that she wishes she were pregnant with Faiz's child?
- 10) Why didn't Nusrat choose to live with Faiz's family until his safe return?
- 11) While away, Faiz gave a note to a man to bring to Peshawar. The note never reaches Nusrat. Predict what Faiz might have written in the note.
- 12) What does Nusrat fear? Why? Do you feel her fear is warranted?

Extension Questions

- 1) Different cultures often participate in different sports. Describe the rules and regulations of a sport from your culture.
- 2) Sketch a representation of the burka. Then, find a picture of a burka and compare your image. Was your imagination accurate? What might be the positive and negative aspects of wearing a burka?
- 3) Explain the significance of Nusrat's acceptance of the burka. What does this tell the reader about her American identity, Elaine?
- 4) Observation and Research: How has your life changed since the events of September 11th? How has life in America, in general, changed? How has life in Afghanistan changed?

Chapter Three

Vocabulary

- 1) **Refugee** – somebody who seeks or takes refuge in a foreign country, especially to avoid war or persecution
- 2) **Irrepressible** – not able to be contained
- 3) **Scowl** – an expression of anger, displeasure, or menace made by drawing the eyebrows together toward the middle of the forehead
- 4) **Adjoin** – to be next to or share a common border with something, especially an area of land
- 5) **Poppies** – plant with red flowers
- 6) **Opium** – an addictive drug made from seeds of the poppy flower
- 7) **Brow** – forehead
- 8) **Furrow** – a rut or groove in a surface
- 9) **Samovar** – a large and often ornate Russian tea urn
- 10) **Mujahideen** – Islamic guerrillas based in Iran and Pakistan who fought a holy war against the Soviet forces occupying Afghanistan in the late 1970s and the 1980s

- 11) **Trudge** – walk wearily
- 12) **Reluctant** – not eager; showing no willingness
- 13) **Mottle** - to mark something with an irregular pattern of patches or spots of different colors

Motivation

What challenges would you face if you were left “home alone”? Do you think you could successfully manage your household? Why or why not?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How does Mada-jan react to the kidnapping of her husband and son?
- 2) Who is Bibi Usmani?
- 3) What news does Bibi Usmani report?
- 4) Why is she leaving Golestan Village? Where is she going? Why?
- 5) Why are Najmah and Mada-jan forced to stay in the village?
- 6) Describe Uncle Mohiuddin. What inferences can you make about his character? Use clues from the text to support your answer.
- 7) Why does Uncle want Najmah and Mada-jan to leave?
- 8) What does Bibi Usmani give to Najmah to help Mada-jan?
- 9) What choice does Najmah make to help keep her remaining family alive?
- 10) In what way(s) does Najmah’s bravery influence Mada-jan’s will to live?
- 11) How does Mada-jan comfort Najmah? Do you believe her words?

Extension Questions

- 1) What can you infer about Najmah’s family because they have never gone to Peshawar? In Najmah’s situation, would you leave for Peshawar? Why or why not?
- 2) Why do you think the Taliban did not force Uncle to join the army?
- 3) Najmah believes her father “is more worried about Uncle than he is about the Taliban.” Discuss your thoughts about this quotation.
- 4) How has Najmah changed since chapter one? Why is she no longer afraid of leopards?
- 5) Mada-jan is alone when she gives birth to Habib. What does this reveal about her character?

Chapter Four

Vocabulary

- 1) **Decrepit** – old and in poor condition
- 2) **Bazaar** – street market
- 3) **Bland** – lacking flavor, character or interest
- 4) **Chide** – to reproach someone gently

- 5) **Kerosene** – colorless flammable oil
- 6) **Rickety** – unstable
- 7) **Contemplate** – to think about something seriously and at length
- 8) **Flee** – to run away
- 9) **Skepticism** – doubting attitude
- 10) **Wee** – tiny; very small
- 11) **Spectacle** – something remarkable that can be seen
- 12) **Omen** – a sign of how somebody or something will fare in the future
- 13) **Detritus** – debris

Motivation

In this chapter, Nusrat plans a celebration to watch a meteor shower. Describe the most impressive natural event you have witnessed, or would like to see.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) What does the postman symbolize to Nusrat?
- 2) Why were Nusrat's mother and father in America disappointed with Nusrat? Can you understand their disappointment? Do you agree or disagree with Nusrat's parent's reaction to her decisions? Explain.
- 3) Why does Nusrat throw a party at her house?
- 4) What is the reaction to Nusrat's plan for a party? Include the reactions of Fatima, Asma, Sultan, and Jamshed. Which reaction do you identify with and why?
- 5) List five items from the feast prepared by Husna and Nusrat.
- 6) Describe Nusrat's home.
- 7) What do Fatima and Nusrat have in common?
- 8) After the party ended, Nusrat begins to think about the meteor shower she shared with Margaret before she became ill. Why did Nusrat choose to spend most of her time alone after her sister died?
- 9) Faiz gives Elaine the name Nusrat, which means "Help." Use evidence from the flashback to explain the reason this name suits her.

Extension Questions

- 1) How are stars important in this novel so far? Take Nusrat's advice on page 48, and use the Internet to research meteorites.
- 2) Describe a superstition from your culture.
- 3) Re-read the description of a persimmon on page 50. Do you think you would like the taste of a persimmon? Why or why not?
- 4) How does your family prepare for a party? What special foods are prepared?

Chapter Five

Vocabulary

- 1) **Eddies** – a movement in a flowing stream of liquid or gas in which the current doubles back to form a small whirl
- 2) **Ferocity** – very fierce or savage
- 3) **Hover** – wait nearby
- 4) **Recoil** – move back suddenly
- 5) **Meander** – wanders

Motivation

Describe the scariest moment of your life. How did you handle your fear?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Describe Habib.
- 2) Contrast Najmah's reaction to Uncle with Mada-jan's reaction to Uncle. Why do you suppose their reactions are different?
- 3) Mada-jan gives Uncle the last of their food when he comes to the house to "visit." What image is she trying to maintain? Why?
- 4) In what ways is Uncle different from Baba-jan, even though they are brothers?
- 5) Why does Najmah leave her mother and newborn baby brother?
- 6) Najmah returns home to check on her mother and brother after three days. Sadly, she returns as her home is being bombed. The author writes, "We look at each other for the briefest instant, our tongues locked inside our mouths." If the "tongues" could speak, what would they say in that moment?
- 7) What was the result of the bombing?

Extension Questions

- 1) What do you find so morally reprehensible that no amount of money would convince you to do it?
- 2) Describe any constellations with which you are familiar. What are the stories behind the creations of these constellations? If you do not know the story of any constellation, do some research!
- 3) Najmah watches the stars, in part, for entertainment. What do you do for entertainment?
- 4) As an American, how did you react to the deaths of Maja-dan and Habib? What are your thoughts on the term "collateral damage"?

Chapter Six

Vocabulary

- 1) **Tripod** – three legged support
- 2) **Mischief** – behavior, especially by children, that is undesirable or troublesome without being malicious
- 3) **Commotion** – a scene of noisy confusion
- 4) **Slabs** – thick pieces
- 5) **Nudge** – to push or poke gently
- 6) **Thoroughfare** – public road; heavily used route
- 7) **Chaotic** – disordered
- 8) **Fragrance** – sweet smell
- 9) **Prodigious** – great in amount, size or extent; very impressive or amazing

Motivation

Describe your favorite teacher. How did/does this person help you learn?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Describe the Persimmon Tree School.
- 2) What might be the students' attitude toward school? Why?
- 3) In your opinion, is Nusrat a good teacher? Explain using details from the text.
- 4) Who is Haroon? What is his job?
- 5) Nusrat allows strangers such as Mansoor and Amina into her home and school. How does she treat them? What does her treatment of strangers reveal about her character?
- 6) What are Nusrat's beliefs about education?
- 7) Nusrat decides to take Amina to Dr. Naveed for treatment. To do this, she must go through the bazaar. What potential dangers might she encounter?
- 8) Why does Nusrat feel compelled to go anyway? What does this compulsion reveal about her character?
- 9) Just as expected, there were explosions and commotion in the bazaar. Luckily no one was hurt, but "Nusrat thinks how easily violence happens here." Why does this incident make Nusrat think of Faiz?

Extension Questions

- 1) How are the children in the Persimmon Tree School similar to and different from American school children?
- 2) Why do you think Husna is not as welcoming of new students and families as Nusrat?
- 3) Why do you think, "many women are not comfortable going to the bazaar unless they are accompanied by a close male relative"?
- 4) Re-read the description of the bazaar on page 79. Sketch what you think this bazaar looks like.

- 5) Describe your reaction to the violence in the bazaar. How would this potential for violence influence your everyday life if you lived in Afghanistan? How does the potential for violence influence your life in the United States?

Chapter Seven

Vocabulary

- 1) **Shard** – a sharp broken piece of glass or metal
- 2) **Pulverize** – crush something to powder
- 3) **Rouse** – to wake somebody from sleep or unconsciousness
- 4) **Oblivious** –unaware
- 5) **Unhampered** – move freely
- 6) **Meager** – unsatisfactorily small
- 7) **Tinge** – slight added element

Motivation

Imagine you are incapable of speaking. How would you communicate with others?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) After seeing her mother and brother die before her eyes, why does Najmah believe she, too, might be dead?
- 2) Najmah says, “I don’t care whether the Taliban find me and kill me.” Why does she say this? What is your reaction to this statement?
- 3) Who are Akhtar and Khalida? How do they help Najmah in her time of need?
- 4) Najmah realizes that Akhtar has buried her hair in the grave that holds her mother and baby brother. What might this symbolize?
- 5) Why does Khalida cut Najmah’s hair, change her clothing, and name?
- 6) Why does Najmah now fear sleep?
- 7) Why hasn’t Najmah spoken on her journey with Akhtar, Khalida and their children?
- 8) Why does the group stop along their journey to Peshawar?

Extension Questions

- 1) How does the inability to speak influence Najmah’s identity?
- 2) How would you behave differently if you were the opposite gender?
- 3) How much is our appearance connected to our identity?
- 4) Imagine you are the director of the film version of this chapter. What music would you choose to play in the background as Najmah’s hair is cut off and buried with her mother and baby brother? Why would you choose this music?

Chapter Eight

Vocabulary

- 1) **Goon** – thug; a person who beats up others
- 2) **Withdrawn** – not friendly or sociable, but quiet and thoughtful
- 3) **Luxury** – great comfort
- 4) **Violation** – crime or infringement of rule
- 5) **Lattice** – crisscross framework
- 6) **Retaliation** – hurt somebody in return
- 7) **Disregard** – ignore somebody or something

Motivation

Have you ever had something negative happen to a member of your family that you thought you might have been able to do something about? If so, what action did you take to prevent it? Explain.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Nusrat has a flashback at the beginning of the chapter that explains the reason the couple moved to Afghanistan from New York. Summarize their reasons for moving.
- 2) Why did Sultan and the rest of the family move from Kabul to Peshawar?
- 3) What lessons has Faiz taught Nusrat about family, religion and love

Extension Questions

- 1) What do you think is the role of the Ministry for the Prevention of Vice and Promotion of Virtue in Taliban ruled society?
- 2) Why does Faiz believe Nusrat is “a rare person”?
- 3) Contrast Nusrat’s life in New York to her life in Afghanistan.
- 4) Do you think authorities should regulate dress codes in public areas? Why or why not?

Chapter Nine

Vocabulary

- 1) **Hoist** – to lift somebody or something up
- 2) **Burden** – a load being carried
- 3) **Scamper** – to run quickly or playfully
- 4) **Edible** – able to be eaten
- 5) **Descent** – going down
- 6) **Intersperse** – to break up the continuity or flow of something with something else

- 7) **Cropped** – short hairstyle
- 8) **Summon** – to send a signal for someone to come
- 9) **Precipitously** – done or acting too quickly with not enough thought
- 10) **Plummet** – to drop steeply and suddenly downward

Motivation

Describe the moment in your life when you have felt the most hunger.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Describe the many obstacles the group faces as they travel from town to town.
- 2) What troubling thoughts run through Najmah's mind?
- 3) Akhtar explains that the group must now travel through the hills instead of the road. Why does he decide to make this change? What obstacles do they face as they travel through the mountains?
- 4) Why does Najmah suddenly feel hopeful that she might find her father and brother?
- 5) Najmah explains "It's been more than two weeks since I've last spoken, and I'm not certain I will ever be able to speak again." In your opinion, what might make Najmah speak?

Extension Questions

- 1) In this chapter, Akhtar and Khalida must search for food to survive their journey. What does it reveal about their character that they are willing to keep Najmah with them, and provide for her well being along with their own children? In their situation, would you be willing to continue helping Najmah?
- 2) Why do you think Najmah is outwardly unaffected by the events of this chapter?
- 3) What do the stars represent to Najmah during this chapter?
- 4) How did you react when you realized the bombing of the village was the result of American action? To Najmah, Khalida and Akhtar, how are the Americans different than the Taliban?
- 5) Do some research – how is it possible to locate your way by looking at the position of stars in the sky?

Chapter Ten

Vocabulary

- 1) **Shawl** – a garment worn by women for the head and shoulders
- 2) **Anonymity** – freedom from identification
- 3) **Senseless** – with no apparent purpose
- 4) **Carrel** – private space for individual study
- 5) **Peering** – looking very closely and carefully
- 6) **Grapple** – to struggle with somebody or something

- 7) **Vestibule** – a small room or hall between an outer door and the main part of a building
- 8) **Queasy** – feeling ill in the stomach; on the verge of vomiting
- 9) **Commotion** – a scene of noisy confusion or activity
- 10) **Animated** – to make somebody or something lively
- 11) **Embroidered** – covered with decorative needlework
- 12) **Insubstantial** – small and weak

Motivation

Do you believe in “love at first sight”? Explain.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How do the stars help Nusrat connect to her husband, Faiz, while he is away?
- 2) How is Nusrat’s use of the stars similar to Najmah’s?
- 3) Summarize the way Nusrat and Faiz met.
- 4) We have not met Faiz, but learn about him through Nusrat and her flashbacks. Describe his character based on the information we get from Elaine in this chapter.
- 5) How does Elaine attempt to repay Faiz for his kindness and help after the robbery?
- 6) Why does Elaine, at this time, feel that her life is insubstantial?
- 7) Why does Elaine feel connected to Faiz?
- 8) What do you think Elaine “loves” about Faiz?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why is it significant that Nusrat has changed her name from Elaine? What does this say to the reader about this character?
- 2) Why is Nusrat losing hope that Faiz is alive?
- 3) How do you think the people of Nusrat’s village feel about Americans? Support your answer with details from the text.
- 4) Why did Elaine like the anonymity of living in New York?
- 5) Contrast Faiz’s apartment with Nusrat’s childhood home. Why do you think Nusrat is fascinated by Faiz’s home?

Chapter Eleven

Vocabulary

- 1) **Callus** – patch of thickened skin
- 2) **Rigid** – firm and stiff
- 3) **Insignia** – an identifying mark or sign
- 4) **Brittle** – hard and breakable

- 5) **Tether** – rope attached to an animal and tied to something else, restricting the animal’s movement
- 6) **Guidance** – advice or counseling

Motivation

What is the greatest physical challenge you have ever encountered? Did you meet the challenge or falter on your course?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How has the journey impacted Najmah physically?
- 2) What lucky thing happens as the group arrives in Torkhum?
- 3) The malek questions Akhtar’s reasoning for making his wife dress like a boy. He explains that she might have been taken to fight. Akhtar responds, “That would be the better evil.” What does he mean by this statement? Do you agree or disagree?
- 4) What is Akhtar’s plan?
- 5) Why is Najmah so disappointed she wants to cry?
- 6) Surprisingly, Najmah realizes she has had her own plan all along the journey. What does she want to do?

Extension Questions

- 1) If you were directing the film version of this novel, how would you costume the refugees and volunteers in this chapter? How would you use clothing to identify the differences between these groups?
- 2) Why does Akhtar continue to call Najmah his son, and use the name Shaheed when introducing her? What does this reveal to the reader about Najmah?
- 3) How is Najmah’s inability to speak symbolic of her identity crisis in this novel?
- 4) If you were Najmah, would you be willing to leave the safety and security of the refugee camp to attempt to find your family? Why or why not?

Chapter Twelve

Vocabulary

- 1) **Pallet** – wooden platform
- 2) **Tallow** – made of a hard, fatty substance
- 3) **Austerity** – severity or plainness
- 4) **Quest** – an especially long or difficult search for something
- 5) **Precision** – exactness or accuracy
- 6) **Awe** – a feeling of amazement and respect mixed with fear
- 7) **Radiate** – to emit energy from
- 8) **Stereotype** – an oversimplified standardized image of a group or a person
- 9) **Credible** – easy to believe
- 10) **Pessimism** – tendency to expect the worst

- 11) **Beckon** – gesture to somebody to come

Motivation

Have you ever considered changing your religion, or acquiring a religion, or giving up religion entirely?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why does Nusrat pray?
- 2) Why did Nusrat make the decision to convert to Islam?
- 3) How does math help Nusrat come to terms with her sister's death?
- 4) How did Faiz help Nusrat to come to the decision to convert?
- 5) Why does Faiz rename Elaine?
- 6) What good news does Haroon report to Nusrat?
- 7) What could this news mean for Faiz's return?
- 8) How does Nusrat react?

Extension Questions

- 1) What stereotypes about Muslims are broken in this chapter?
- 2) Do you think your name reflects your personality? Why or why not?
- 3) If you could choose another name for yourself, what would it be? Why?
- 4) Both Nusrat and Najmah change names in this novel. What is the significance of these changes? How does this similar event help the reader understand the parallel narrative more thoroughly?
- 5) Nusrat celebrates the news of the liberation of Kunduz by preparing special foods. How does your family celebrate important, unexpected good news?
- 6) How does Mansoor's transformation reflect changes in other characters in this novel? How is her transformation similar to and different from the changes in Najmah since chapter one?

Chapter Thirteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Jostle** – to knock or bump against somebody or something
- 2) **Clamor** – demand noisily
- 3) **Inclined** – motivated to do something
- 4) **Squat** – to crouch down with the knees bent and the thighs resting on the calves
- 5) **Adept** – highly proficient or skilled
- 6) **Resent** – be annoyed at because of a perceived injustice or wrong
- 7) **Resolve** – to come to a firm decision about
- 8) **Resume** – to continue with something after a temporary halt
- 9) **Bandits** – an armed robber who steals from travelers, usually at gunpoint

- 10) **Obscenities** – a word, phrase or statement that is offensive
- 11) **Careen** – sway or swerve while moving quickly
- 12) **Jounces** – move while bouncing
- 13) **Jolts** – shake or jerk violently
- 14) **Abyss** – a chasm or gorge so deep that its extent is not visible

Motivation

What does “home” mean to you? Does a home always have to be a physical space, or can it be something else?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why does Najmah say that she is “...not inclined to call any place home, except for the farm where I’ve always lived with my father and mother and brother in the Kunduz Hills, below the rim of Hoh-i-Dil”?
- 2) What is her overall plan?
- 3) Describe life in the refugee camp in Torkhum. Would you call it “home”? Explain.
- 4) Why is Khalida growing irritated with Najmah? Likewise, why does Najmah resent Khalida?
- 5) Why does Najmah continue to pose as a boy in the camp long after Khalida has taken off her turban?
- 6) Why does Najmah begin to distance herself from Khalida and Akhtar?
- 7) Summarize Najmah’s daring escape from the refugee camp. Why is her escape so risky?
- 8) What happens to the driver of the truck while on route?
- 9) At the end of the chapter, for what does Najmah pray?

Extension Questions

- 1) How does Khalida react to her newly found image as a woman? Why do you think she was so uncomfortable posing as a man?
- 2) Why is Najmah more useful as Shaheed? What does this tell the reader about the culture of the refugee camp?
- 3) Why is Najmah still incapable of speech?
- 4) If you were Najmah, would you have snuck into the truck? Why or why not?
- 5) If you were filming this chapter as a movie, what background music would you select for the last two pages? Why?

Chapter Fourteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Lurch** – to lean or pitch violently to one side

- 2) **Tarpaulins** - a heavy waterproof material, especially treated canvas, used as a covering and to protect things from moisture
- 3) **Bandolier** – a soldier’s belt with loops or pockets for carrying ammunition
- 4) **Haggle** – to try to settle on a price
- 5) **Withered** – shriveled or dried up

Motivation

Do you feel that you are a lucky person? Why or why not?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) At the start of the chapter, Najmah says she “...will need a lot of luck” to get away from the bandits driving the pear truck. Read pages 159 – 164. Is Najmah lucky? Use text to support your response.
- 2) Despite her difficulties in getting to Peshawar, why does Najmah feel she has reason to be hopeful?
- 3) Once in the bazaar, Najmah quickly resorts to stealing. Do you agree or disagree with what she has done? Explain.
- 4) Where does she sleep on her first night in Peshawar? Is she safe? Why or why not?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why does the narrative remain with Najmah for this chapter instead of switching to Nusrat?
- 2) What does the rain symbolize in this chapter?
- 3) Bazaars are a common setting in this novel. What does this bazaar represent to Najmah?
- 4) Why does Najmah decide to try and speak again?

Chapter Fifteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Cast** – to direct the eyes or a look toward somebody or something
- 2) **Ironic** – involving a surprising or apparently contradictory fact
- 3) **Neglect** – fail to do something
- 4) **Dignity** – a proper sense of pride and self respect
- 5) **Departure** – the action of setting off on a journey
- 6) **Extract** – pull something out
- 7) **Queue** - a line

Motivation

Nusrat obviously believes very strongly in education. How do you feel about formal schooling? Do people need to attend school in order to be successful? Why or why not?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why do Farid and Farooq have to leave the Persimmon Tree School?
- 2) How does Nusrat feel about their departure? Why?
- 3) How has Mansoor's experiences in the Persimmon Tree School changed her outlook on life?
- 4) Why does Nusrat decide that she needs to visit Faiz's family?

Extension Questions

- 1) Describe your reaction to the fact that American cluster bombs are the same size, shape and color as the food packets.
- 2) The war in the northern part of Afghanistan seems to be over. Do you think the successful removal of the Taliban would help the people of Afghanistan change their opinion of the Americans? Why or why not?

Chapter Sixteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Glide** – to move smoothly
- 2) **Forbidden** – not permitted
- 3) **Compound** – group of buildings
- 4) **Settlement** – the act of populating a place with residents
- 5) **Bungalow** – one story house
- 6) **Elaborate** – finely or richly detailed

Motivation

How adept are you at playing "charades"? Why is this game challenging?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why does Najmah leave the bazaar?
- 2) When Najmah approaches a guard at a gate, what does she want from him? How does she let him know her intentions if she cannot speak to him?
- 3) The guard allows Najmah to meet the malek. How does he plan to help her?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why does Najmah swivel and sway when unable to answer a question? What does this reveal about her psychological state?
- 2) Do you think Nusrat will be able to help Najmah? Why or why not?
- 3) Why do you think the women of Peshawar behave so much more freely than the women of Baghlan and Faizabad?
- 4) Are you surprised that the stories of Nusrat and Najmah converge? Why or why not?
- 5) Throughout her journey, Najmah is often judged based on her appearance. Describe a time when you have been judged based on your appearance. How did it feel?
- 6) Do some research: Retrace Najmah's steps from Golestan Village to Peshawar. How many miles has she traveled?

Chapter Seventeen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Swivel** – pivot or rotate
- 2) **Flicker** – shine unsteadily
- 3) **Gnaw** – chew at something
- 4) **Emphatic** – expressed, thought or done with emphasis
- 5) **Collide** – crash into something
- 6) **Dubious** – unsure about outcome
- 7) **Solemn** – having or showing sincerity and gravity
- 8) **Shorn** – having short hair
- 9) **Insubstantial** – small and weak

Motivation

Who gave you your name? What does your name mean? What does your family name mean?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How does Haroon introduce Najmah to Nusrat?
- 2) What is Nusrat's first impression of Najmah?
- 3) How does Nusrat know Najmah is a girl? What does this tell you about Afghani culture?
- 4) Why do you think Najmah is able to speak to Nusrat?

Extension Questions

- 1) Nusrat uses persimmons to encourage and reward her students. What object, words or ideas do your teachers use to encourage and reward you? What is the most effective method of encouragement and reward you have experienced?
- 2) How would you react to a new, non-American student in your class?

Chapter Eighteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Reed** – a tall water plant
- 2) **Accost** – approach and stop somebody
- 3) **Divert** – change something’s path
- 4) **Ladle** – to serve food with a spoon with a long handle and deep bowl
- 5) **Extravagant** – profusely decorated
- 6) **Benefit** – something that has a good effect or promotes well being
- 7) **Bitter** – strong and sharp in taste
- 8) **Pungent** – strong smelling or strong tasting
- 9) **Wary** – cautious

Motivation

Describe the kindest thing anyone has ever done for you. How did you react to this act of kindness? Did this act of kindness have any far-reaching effect on you as a person?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Nusrat assures Najmah at the beginning of the chapter that she is safe with her in her home. After reading the chapter, should Najmah trust Nusrat? Why or why not? Use text from the story to support your response.
- 2) Why is Nusrat insistent that Najmah focus on learning?
- 3) How does Najmah adjust to life in her new “home away from home”?
- 4) What habits does Najmah have to change in order to “fit in”?
- 5) Why do you think Husna is rude to Najmah?
- 6) What does Najmah decide to call Nusrat? Why does Najmah give Nusrat this name?

Extension Questions

- 1) Compare and contrast Najmah’s bathing ritual at home and in Nusrat’s house. How is this different from bathing rituals in the United States?
- 2) Does Husna have a right to be angry with Najmah? How would you feel in Husna’s situation?

- 3) Do you think Najmah displays good manners in this chapter? What actions are considered “good manners” in your home?

Chapter Nineteen

Vocabulary

- 1) **Stubble** – short growth of hair
- 2) **Cardamom** – a type of spice
- 3) **Emerge** – to appear out or from behind something
- 4) **Scandalous** – causing or deserving to cause public outrage
- 5) **Husky** – hoarse or dry sound to the voice
- 6) **Visualize** – imagine; to form a visual image in the mind
- 7) **Bolsters** – long cylindrical cushion
- 8) **Waver** – move in different directions
- 9) **Appraise** – to form an opinion about someone’s merits or qualities
- 10) **Marvel** – something that inspires awe, amazement or admiration
- 11) **Engulf** – overwhelm

Motivation

If you had to choose one person to tell your deepest secret to, who would it be? Why would you select this person?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Why does Najmah decide to tell Nusrat about the Taliban’s attack on her family?
- 2) Why does Nusrat discourage Najmah from pursuing the idea of returning to her village?
- 3) Even though Nusrat disagrees with Najmah’s wish to return home, how do you know she understands Najmah’s reasoning?
- 4) How does Nusrat absolutely earn Najmah’s trust in this chapter?
- 5) Why did Najmah’s uncle visit the school?
- 6) Why is Najmah so afraid of Uncle?
- 7) At the end of the chapter, Nusrat has a dream. What does this dream signify?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why does Nusrat give Najmah tea with cardamom?
- 2) Why is a short haircut on a girl scandalous in Peshawar? What fashion statement would be scandalous here in the United States?
- 3) Why does Najmah believe a non-Muslim will be incapable of understanding her desire to return to her family’s land? Describe your reaction to her desire to return to the farm.
- 4) If you were Nusrat, would you reveal Najmah’s location? Why or why not?
- 5) Why do you think Nusrat reveals Najmah’s identity to the other students?

- 6) The average life expectancy in Afghanistan is 45 years. Research the average life expectancy in the United States. What might account for the difference in these two numbers? How would you live your life differently if you thought you would only live to be 45 years old?

Chapter Twenty

Vocabulary

- 1) **Shimmer** – shine with wavering light
- 2) **Dung** – animal excrement
- 3) **Hesitate** – be slow to act
- 4) **Arc** – to form a curve or move along a curved path
- 5) **Grief** – intense sorrow
- 6) **Pilgrimage** – a journey to a holy place, undertaken for religious reasons
- 7) **Ancient** – very old

Motivation

Do you believe that sometimes messages are sent to us in the form of unexplainable “signs”? Have you ever been sent a message in this way? Explain.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How does Nusrat know in her heart that her husband, Faiz is dead?
- 2) Even though Najmah knows she can trust Nusrat, why does she so desperately want to leave?
- 3) Why does Najmah fear the meteor? When has she seen this “sign” before?
- 4) How does Nusrat dispel any fear Najmah has about meteors?
- 5) How has Najmah’s view of the sky changed?
- 6) Why is the idea that she is “...as unimportant as a speck of dust in it” a comforting thought to Najmah?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why does Najmah begin to swing her head and swivel her shoulders when she sees the meteor? What do you do when you are afraid?
- 2) Constellations are groups of stars forming shapes in the sky. Create a constellation to represent Najmah and Nusrat. Why did you choose this shape?
- 3) How does Nusrat come to realize Faiz will not return?
- 4) Describe the stereotypical image of Americans that influenced Najmah’s feelings towards Nusrat. What breaks down this stereotype?
- 5) Describe the stereotypical image of Muslims held by Elaine (Nusrat) before meeting Faiz. How does this novel help break down this stereotype?
- 6) Does your religion have any sacred objects or places? If so, what are they?

- 7) Nusrat asks Najmah, “How can it (the Black Stone) be evil if it’s part of the world’s holiest shrine?” Do you believe objects can be good or evil? Explain your answer.

Chapter Twenty-One

Vocabulary

- 1) **Bitter** – penetrating and unpleasant cold
- 2) **Optimistic** – tending to take a hopeful and positive view of future outcomes
- 3) **Skirmish** – brief fight between two armed groups
- 4) **Guerrilla** – a member of an irregular paramilitary unit, usually with a political objective such as the overthrow of a government. Guerrillas usually operate in small groups to harass and carry out sabotage.
- 5) **Euphoria** – a feeling of great joy, excitement or well being
- 6) **Ponder** – to think about something carefully over a period of time
- 7) **Excruciating** – extremely painful
- 8) **Bemused** – to cause somebody to be confused or puzzled
- 9) **Bear** – to be able to endure something

Motivation

Recall your most vivid dream. What might have been the significance of the dream? Did the dream relate to your life in some way? Did the dream help to bring a portion of your life into focus? Explain.

Comprehension Questions

- 1) How has the change in government affected the people?
- 2) Why would refugees “return to their ruined farms in a state of **euphoria**”?
- 3) Why does Nusrat want to keep the school opened?
- 4) Recount Nusrat’s dream of Faiz and Margaret. What does this dream signify?
- 5) How does her dream help Nusrat accept the deaths of her sister and husband?
- 6) How has Najmah’s appearance changed since she arrived at the school?
- 7) Why doesn’t Nusrat tell her mother-in-law that she believes Faiz to be dead?
- 8) Why does Nusrat feel she needs to return to New York to see her American family?
- 9) Why wouldn’t Nusrat feel comfortable staying with Faiz’s family?
- 10) What proposition does Nusrat make to Najmah?

Extension Questions

- 1) Why do you think Nusrat dreams of Faiz and Margaret as stars?
- 2) Why does the narrative now shift within, rather than between, chapters?
- 3) In this chapter, Nusrat says, “My culture will always be with me, wherever I go.” In what ways is your family’s culture always with you?

Chapter Twenty-Two

Vocabulary

- 1) **Slate** – writing tablet
- 2) **Iridescent** – having a lustrous or brilliant appearance
- 3) **Contrite** – deeply sorry for having behaved wrongly
- 4) **Hasty** – done in a hurry

Motivation

Recall the most important decision you have ever made in your life to this point. List the pros and cons of your decision. How might this pro/con list have helped you to make your decision in the first place?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Read from pages 238 – 250. Najmah must decide whether she should move to America with Nusrat or stay in Afghanistan and return to her Village. Make a chart and list the pros and cons for each choice.
- 2) Review your list. If you were Najmah, would you go to America with Nusrat? Why or why not?
- 3) Why does Najmah suspect the servant, Husna, of revealing her location to Uncle?
- 4) Why does Najmah compare her uncle to a meteor?

Extension Questions

- 1) Do some more research: Is it possible to navigate your way using only the stars as a guide? How would you manage to do this?
- 2) Imagine you are the director of a film version of this novel. How would you choose to shoot the final page of this chapter? Think of lighting, camera angles, costume choices and background music when answering.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Vocabulary

- 1) **Bustle** – to work or behave in an ostentatiously hurried and energetic way
- 2) **Begrudge** – to resent the fact that somebody has something
- 3) **Efficient** – well organized
- 4) **Honor** – strong moral character or strength, and adherence to ethical principals
- 5) **Abrupt** – sudden and unexpected
- 6) **Leaden** – tired and heavy
- 7) **Assume** – suppose something
- 8) **Beneficiary** – somebody who receives a benefit of something

- 9) **Veiled** – disguised and suggested
- 10) **Immobile** – without motion
- 11) **Inevitable** – impossible to avoid or prevent from happening

Motivation

Do well-written novels require a clear, definitive ending? Why or why not?

Comprehension Questions

- 1) Who is the “ghost” that appears at the door to the school?
- 2) Describe Nur. In what ways is he similar to Najmah when she first arrived? Why do you think Nur appears and behaves in a similar manner to the way Najmah did when she first arrived?
- 3) How do Nur and Najmah react when they see each other? Why do they react in this way?
- 4) What news does Nur share with Najmah about Baba-jan and the other men of the Golestan Village?
- 5) Why does Nusrat insist that they close the school and leave for Faiz’s family’s house?
- 6) When they arrive at the house, Nur explains the way he managed to escape from the Taliban with his life. Explain.
- 7) Sultan returns to Nusrat’s house to cancel lessons at the school. What does he find out about Husna? Why do you think she did not return to work for Nusrat?
- 8) How does Sultan offer to help Nur and Najmah? Why does he do this?
- 9) What information does Nur share with Nusrat? How does she respond?
- 10) Why does Nusrat still want to go to Mazar-i-Sharif?

Extension Questions

- 1) Najmah thinks, “In the face of such evil and cruelty the gentle seldom survive.” Discuss your thoughts about this quotation.
- 2) Nur feels that to go to America, rather than returning to their family’s farm, would dishonor his father and ancestors. Do you agree? Why or why not?
- 3) How do you honor your parents and ancestors?
- 4) Given the situation, do you think Baba-jan and Mada-jan would want their children to return to the farm or go to America? Why?
- 5) What does a flower in the barrel of the gun of a mujahideen represent to Nur?
- 6) Were you satisfied with the ending of this novel? Why or why not?

After Reading

- 1) Cast the major characters in this novel using famous actors, actresses and musicians, family, friends, and/or school staff.
- 2) What was the most important lesson you learned from reading this novel? Why was this lesson so important to you?
- 3) Would you rather become friends with Nusrat or Najmah? Why?
- 4) Did you enjoy reading this book? Why or why not?
- 5) Create an alternative title for this novel.
- 6) Create an alternative ending for the novel. What would happen to Nur, Najmah and Nusrat?

Appendix

Basic Beliefs of Islam

Islam is the second largest of the three major religions, along with Christianity and Judaism. Muslims believe that the Qur'an (Koran) is the unaltered word of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad, (570-632) through the angel Gabriel. Islam, which is typically translated as "submission to God," is derived from the Arabic word *salam*, which means "peace." When Muslims, followers of Islam, greet one another, they will do so by saying *Assalamu Alaikum*, which means "peace be upon you."

The teachings of Islam are comprised of both faith and duty (*din*). One branch of Muslim learning, "Tawhid", defines all that a man should believe, while the other branch, "Shari'a," prescribes everything that he should do. Muslims worship God directly. Religious leaders do not have any divine characteristics; people and objects are not considered holy. It is, in fact, sacrilegious to worship anything or anyone outside of God. Muslims, unlike Christians, do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, although they do believe he was a prophet.

The Muslim place of worship is called a mosque. The word comes from the Arabic for "place of prostration". Muslims believe that they have one life, after which they are judged.

Five Articles of Faith are the main doctrines of Islam. All Muslims are expected to believe the following:

1. **God.** There is one true God and his name is **Allah**.
2. **Angels.** Angels exist and interact with human lives. They are comprised of light, and each has different purposes or messages to bring to earth. Each man or woman has two angels who record his actions; one records good deeds, the other bad deeds.
3. **Scripture.** There are four inspired books, the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Qur'an.
4. **Prophets.** God has spoken through numerous prophets throughout time. The six greatest are: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Muhammad is the last and greatest of Allah's messengers.
5. **Last Days.** On the last day there will be a time of resurrection and judgment. Those who follow Allah and Muhammad will go to Islamic heaven, or Paradise. Those who do not will go to hell.

The Five Pillars of Faith are observances in Islam which are duties each Muslim must perform. These are five duties that every Muslim is obliged to perform.

1. **Creed (Shahada)**- One must state, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah." publicly to become a Muslim. Muslims say this when they wake up in the morning, and just before they go to sleep at night.

2. **Prayer (Salat)**- Prayer must be done by all Muslims over the age of 10 five times a day (upon rising, at noon, in mid-afternoon, after sunset, and before going to sleep) towards the direction of **Mecca**. The call to prayer is sounded by the **muezzin** (Muslim crier) from a tower (minaret) within the **mosque**. Salat is very different from praying on the inspiration of the moment. While an individual can pray on his own, Muslims prefer to perform *Salat* with others, as this demonstrates the unity of all Muslims. Having specific times each day to be close to Allah helps Muslims remain aware of the importance of their faith, and the role it plays in every part of life.
3. **Almsgiving (Zakat)**- Muslims are legally required to give one-fortieth (2.5%) of their income to the needy. Since those who receive alms are helping the giver achieve salvation, there is no sense of shame in receiving charity. Giving in this way is intended to free Muslims from the love of money. It reminds them that everything they have really belongs to God.
4. **Fasting (Sawm)**- During the holy month of Ramadan (the 9th Muslim month), faithful Muslims fast from sunup to sundown each day. *Sawm* is usually described as fasting, but it actually involves abstaining from all bodily pleasures between dawn and sunset. Not only is food forbidden, but also things like smoking, chewing gum, and any sexual activity. *Sawm* helps Muslims develop self-control, gain a better understanding of God's gifts and greater compassion towards the deprived. *Eid Al Fitr*: This religious festival marks the breaking of the fast and the end of Ramadan. Congregational prayers are held, gifts exchanged, delicious food prepared and new clothes are worn.
5. **Pilgrimage (Hajj)**- Muslims are expected to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime if they have the means to do it and are physically capable of the trip. It is an essential part of gaining salvation, so the old or infirm may send someone in their place. It involves a set of rituals and ceremonies.

Additional Facts

1. Another religious duty associated with the five pillars is **Jihad**, or Holy War. This duty requires that if the situation warrants, men are required to go to war to defend or spread Islam. If they are killed, they are guaranteed eternal life in Paradise.
2. Worldwide, there are 1.2 billion Muslims. There are 7 million Muslims in the United States. Islam is the dominant religion throughout large portions of Asia and Africa, with the largest Muslim populations living in Indonesia (170 million), Pakistan (136 million), Bangladesh (106 million), and India (103 million). Most Arabs are Muslims, but most Muslims are not Arabs.
3. There are two main sects of Islam: Sunni and Shiite. One of their main differences is in their beliefs about who were the leaders following the death of Muhammad. Sunni, from the Arabic word for "tradition," accepted the succession of Muhammad's elected successors. The majority of Muslims in the world today are Sunnis. Shiite, from the Arabic word for "faction," believe that leaders must be descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. Sunnis and Shiites share most basic religious tenets. However, their differences

sometimes have served as the basis for religious intolerance, political infighting, and violent confrontations.

- *Sunni* comprise about 85 percent of all Muslims. Nations with Sunni majority include Egypt, Saudi Arabia and most other Arab nations, as well as non-Arab Turkey and Afghanistan. Most Palestinian Muslims are Sunni.
- *Shiite* are the second-largest sect (approximately 10-15% of all Muslims). Shiite populations live in a number of countries, but they constitute a majority in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Azerbaijan.

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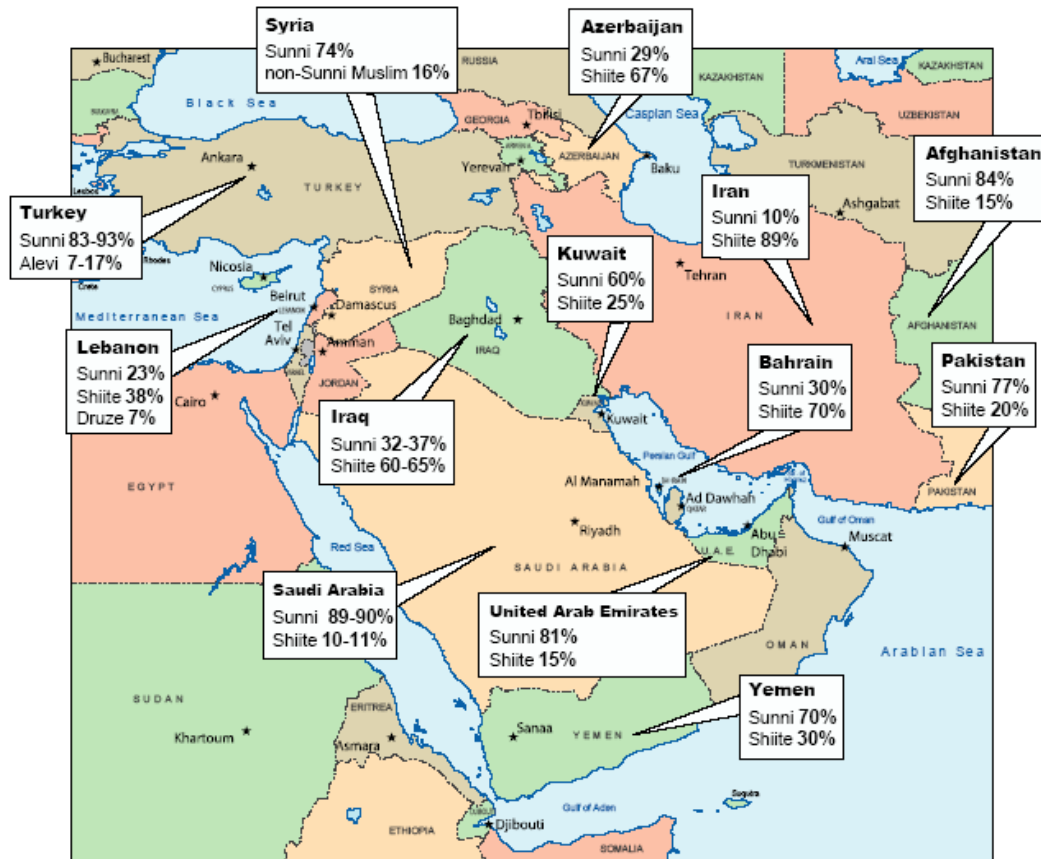
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Demographic Distribution Estimates



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS. (K. Yancey 2/02/04)

Notes: Figures in this map indicate the percentages of Sunni and Shiite Muslims in the population. They do not total 100%, since they exclude Christians and other minorities. In many countries, particularly where Shiites constitute a significant religious minority, there are no reliable or exact statistics of the percentage of these groups in the broader population. For instance, the most recent official census in Saudi Arabia, conducted in 1999, did not count the number of Shiites. For Iraq, it is widely acknowledged that there has been no reliable census in decades. Existing indicators of religious affiliation in Iraq, as reported by the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), are only estimates. In Lebanon, no census has been conducted since 1932. These complications, in addition to general shortcomings in the gathering of reliable statistical information about the region, must be considered when examining this map.

Statistics on Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Pakistan are taken from CIA *World Factbook* (2003). Statistics on Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen are taken from the Department of State *International Religious Freedom Report* (2003). Statistics on Lebanon are from *Lebanon's Political Mosaic*, published by the Directorate of Intelligence of the CIA, NESA 92-10020, LDA 92-13537, August 1992. Not all Lebanese agree with the CIA figures. The Turkish government is a secular government and does not produce official statistics on any religious or ethnic group in Turkey. For Syria, "non-Sunni Muslims" include Twelvers, Seveners, Alawites, and Druzes.

Basic Chronology of Afghan History

Afghanistan, often called the crossroads of Central Asia, has had a very turbulent history. Through the ages, the region today known as *Afghanistan* has been occupied by many forces including the Persian Empire, Genghis Khan and Alexander the Great. Invading armies and peaceful migrations have brought in diverse peoples to this Central Asian crossroads. As a result, Afghanistan is a country of ethnic minorities: Pashtun (38 percent), Tajik (25 percent), Hazara (19 percent), and Uzbek (6 percent). The towering Hindu Kush range dominates and divides Afghanistan. The northern plains and valleys are home to Tajiks and Uzbeks. Pashtuns inhabit the desert-dominated southern plateaus. Hazara live in the central highlands. Kabul, south of the Hindu Kush, is linked by narrow passes to the northern plains.

The Afghanistan nation-state, as it is known today, came into existence in 1746 under the Durrani Empire, but control was ceded to Britain until King Amanullah acceded to the throne in 1919. During the period of British intervention in Afghanistan, ethnic Pashtun territories were divided by the Durand Line and would lead to strained relations between Afghanistan and British India and later the new state of Pakistan over what came to known as the Pashtunistan debate.

1921: The British are defeated in the Third British-Afghan War (1919-21), and Afghanistan becomes an independent nation. Concerned that Afghanistan has fallen behind the rest of the world, Emir Amanullah Khan begins a rigorous campaign of socioeconomic reform. Afghanistan gains full control of her foreign affairs. Amanullah Khan initiates a series of ambitious efforts at social and political modernization.

1926: Khan declares Afghanistan a monarchy, rather than an emirate, and proclaims himself king.

1933: Zahir Shah inherits the throne after father's assassination. He rules until 1973, a period of relative stability.

1934: The U.S. formally recognizes Afghanistan.

1940: Zahir Shah proclaims Afghanistan as neutral during WW2

1947: Britain withdraws from India. Pakistan is created from Indian and Afghan territory.

1953: Prince Mohammad Daoud becomes Prime Minister; turns to the Soviet Union for military aid.

1956: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev agrees to help Afghanistan, and the two countries become close allies.

1957: The Purdah is made optional, women begin to enroll in the University which has become co-educational; women begin to enter the workforce and the government

1965: January: Afghan Communist Party secretly formed. Babrak Karmal is one of the founders.

1973 – King Mohammed Zahir's Pro-Soviet brother-in-law, Sardar Mohammed Daoud Khan launches a bloodless military coup. Khan's regime, PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) comes to power. Daoud Khan abolishes the monarchy and declares himself president. The Republic of Afghanistan is established with firm ties to the USSR.

1975-1977: Daoud Khan proposes new constitution and starts to oust suspected opponents from his government. Women's rights confirmed.

1978: Daoud and his entire family are murdered in 1978, when the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan conducts a coup and takes over the government. Nur Mohammad Taraki becomes president, and Babrak Karmal is named deputy Prime Minister. They proclaim independence from Soviet influence, and declare their policies to be based on Islamic principles, Afghan nationalism, and socioeconomic justice. Taraki signs friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. In June, the U.S.-supported guerrilla movement Mujahadeen (Persian for "warriors") is created.

1979: February 14: American ambassador Adolph Dubs is killed. The U.S. cuts off assistance to Afghanistan. Power struggle between Taraki and deputy prime minister Hafizullah Amin ensues. Taraki is killed on September 14 in a confrontation with Amin supporters. USSR invades Afghanistan on December 24 to bolster the faltering communist regime. On December 27, Amin and many of his followers are killed. Deputy Prime Minister Babrak Karmal becomes Prime Minister. Widespread opposition to Karmal and the Soviets spawns violent public demonstrations. By early 1980, the Mujahadeen rebels have united against Soviet invaders and the USSR-backed Afghan Army.

1982: Some 2.8 million Afghans have fled from the war to Pakistan; another 1.5 million have fled to Iran. Afghan guerrillas gain control of rural areas, and Soviet troops hold urban areas.

1984: United Nations investigates reported human rights violations in Afghanistan.

1986: The Mujahadeen are receiving arms from the United States, Britain, and China, via Pakistan.

1987: Mujahideen make great gains, defeat of Soviets eminent.

1988 - 1989: The U.S., Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Soviet Union sign peace accords in Geneva guaranteeing Afghan independence and the withdrawal of 100,000 Soviet troops. Following Soviet withdrawal (February 15, 1989), the American and Pakistani trained Mujahadeen continue their resistance against the Soviet-backed regime of communist president Najibullah. Afghan guerrillas name Sibhatullah Mojadidi as head of their exiled government.

1992: The Mujahadeen and other rebel groups, with the aid of turncoat government troops, storm the capital, Kabul, and oust Najibullah from power. The U.N. offers protection to Najibullah. The Mujahadeen form an Islamic state: the Islamic Jihad Council. Professor Burhannudin Rabbani is elected president.

1994: Fighting subsequently continued among the various mujahidin factions. This eventually gave rise to a state of warlordism. The chaos and corruption involved in warlordism. The most serious of this fighting occurred in 1994, when 10,000 people were killed from factions fighting in the Kabul area.

1995: Newly-formed Islamic militia, the Taliban, rises to power on promises of peace. Most Afghans, exhausted by years of drought, famine and war, approve of the Taliban for upholding traditional Islamic values. Backed by Pakistan and her strategic allies, the Taliban develops as a political/religious force and eventually is able to capture 90% of the country, aside from Afghan Northern Alliance strongholds primarily in the northeast. The Taliban imposes a strict interpretation of Islamic Sharia law. The Taliban outlaws cultivation of poppies for the opium trade, cracks down on crime, and severely curtails the education and employment of women. Women must be fully veiled, no longer allowed to work, go out alone or even wear white socks. Men are forced to grow beards. Buzkashi, the Afghan national sport is outlawed. Islamic law is enforced via public executions and amputations. The U.S. refuses to recognize the authority of the Taliban.

1995-1999: Continuing drought devastates farmers and makes many rural areas uninhabitable. More than one million Afghans flee to neighboring Pakistan, where they languish in squalid refugee camps. Massive human rights violations by the Taliban.

1997: Taliban publicly executes Najibullah.

1998: February--Earthquake strikes in northeastern Afghanistan, killing over 4,000 people, destroying villages and leaving thousands of people homeless. August--Taliban finally capture Mazar-i-Sharif, and massacre thousands of innocent civilians afterwards, mostly Hazaras. September--Tensions rise between Iran and the Taliban. Iranians are angry about the killing of their diplomats and a journalist by the Taliban when they captured Mazar-i-Sharif. Soon they deploy 70,000 troops to carry out military exercises near the Afghan border. In the end, no fighting occurs between the Taliban and the Iranian army.

1999: February--Earthquake hits eastern Afghanistan, affecting over 30,000 people, and killing at least 60 to 70 people. September--The ex-king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, calls for a grand assembly, or Loya Jirga to discuss ways of bringing peace to the country. The United Front soon welcomes the idea, but the Taliban ridicule Mohammad Zahir Shah's attempts at establishing peace. October-- UN Security Council Resolution 1267 is adopted; sanctions against the Taliban on grounds that they offered sanctuary to Osama bin Ladin.

2000: International terrorist Osama Bin Laden is widely believed to be hiding in Afghanistan, where he is cultivating thousands of followers in terrorist training camps. The U.S. demands that Bin Laden be extradited to stand trial for the bombing of two U.S. embassies in Africa. The Taliban declines to extradite him. December-- the United Nations punishes Afghanistan with sanctions restricting trade and economic development (Security Council Resolution 1333)

2001: The Taliban controls 95 percent of Afghanistan. March--Despite pleas and requests from various international diplomats, Islamic scholars, the Taliban destroy ancient historical statues in the Kabul Museum, historical sites in Ghazni, and blow up the giant Bamiyan Buddhas from the 5th century. The world expresses outrage and disgust against the Taliban action. April--UN accuses Pakistan of not allowing adequate supply of food and medicines to displaced Afghans, at the Jalozai camp, near Peshawar. May-- Taliban order religious minorities to wear tags identifying themselves as non-Muslims. September 11 -- suicide attacks on the U.S. kill more than 3,000 people and destroy the two towers of the World Trade Center and part of the Pentagon. October-- Abdul Haq is killed by the Taliban. The United States and UK working with the forces of the United Front (UNIFSA) launch air strikes against the Taliban. (The Americans hold Osama bin Laden directly responsible for the attacks on the World Trade Center, and the Taliban were targeted for protecting him.) November: Taliban lose control of Mazar-i Sharif. December 5-- Bonn Agreement. Major leaders from the Afghan opposition groups and diaspora meet in Bonn, Germany and agree on a plan for the formulation of an interim government that results in the inauguration of Hamid Karzai as Chairman of the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA)

2002:) In addition to occasionally violent political jockeying and ongoing military action to root out remaining al-Qaida and Taliban elements, the country suffers from enormous poverty, rampant warlordism, a crumbling infrastructure, and widespread land mines. April-- Former King Mohammad Zahir returns to Afghanistan (April) -- does not claim throne. War continues against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. June-- Loya Jirga elects Hamid Karzai as President of a Transitional Government. Karzai picks members of his administration to serve until elections are held in 2004.

2003: War against Al Qaeda and the Taliban continue -- further weakened. August - NATO takes control of security in Kabul.

2004: January-- Afghanistan adopts a new constitution. The country is now a republic with three branches of government (Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary). October/November - Presidential elections are finally held after being delayed twice. Hamid Karzai is declared the winner, with 55.4% of the votes.. The elections were not without controversy; allegations of fraud and ballot stuffing were brought up by many of the presidential candidates. After decades of war, Afghanistan is rebuilding its economy and government. On December 7, 2004 Hamid Karzai became the first democratically elected president in Afghanistan's history.

Source: <http://www.afghan-web.com/history/>

Who Are the Taliban?

The Taliban ("Students of Islamic Knowledge Movement") ruled Afghanistan from 1996 until 2001. They came to power during Afghanistan's long civil war. Although they managed to hold 90% of the country's territory, their policies—including their treatment of women and support of terrorists—ostracized them from the world community. The Taliban was ousted from power in December 2001 by the U.S. military and Afghani opposition forces in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the U.S.

The Taliban are one of the *mujahideen* ("holy warriors" or "freedom fighters") groups that formed during the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979-89). After the withdrawal of Soviet forces, the Soviet-backed government lost ground to the *mujahideen*. In 1992, Kabul was captured and an alliance of *mujahideen* set up a new government. However, the various factions were unable to cooperate and fell to fighting each other. Afghanistan was reduced to a collection of territories held by competing warlords.

Groups of *taliban* were loosely organized on a regional basis during the occupation and civil war. Although they represented a potentially huge force, they didn't emerge as a united entity until the *taliban* of Kandahar made their move in 1994. In late 1994, a group of well-trained *taliban* were chosen by Pakistan to protect a convoy trying to open a trade route from Pakistan to Central Asia. They proved an able force, fighting off rival *mujahideen* and warlords. The *taliban* then went on to take the city of Kandahar, beginning a surprising advance that ended with their capture of Kabul in September 1996.

The Taliban's popularity with the Afghan people surprised the country's other warring factions. Many Afghans, weary of conflict and anarchy, were relieved to see corrupt and often brutal warlords replaced by the devout Taliban, who had some success in eliminating corruption, restoring peace, and allowing commerce to resume. The Taliban, under the direction of Mullah Muhammad Omar, brought about this order through the institution of a very strict interpretation of *Sharia*, or Islamic law. Public executions and punishments (such as floggings) became regular events at Afghan soccer stadiums. Frivolous activities, like kite-flying, were outlawed. In order to root out "non-Islamic" influence, television, music, and the Internet were banned. Men were required to wear beards, and subjected to beatings if they didn't.

Most shocking to the West was the treatment of women. When the Taliban took Kabul, they immediately forbade girls to go to school. Moreover, women were barred from working outside the home, precipitating a crisis in healthcare and education. A woman was to stay home, playing outside was not allowed, and meetings between her closest friends was private and limited. Women were also prohibited from leaving their home without a male relative—those that did so risked being beaten, even shot, by officers of the "ministry for the protection of virtue and prevention of vice." A woman caught wearing fingernail polish may have had her fingertips chopped off. All this, according to the Taliban, was to safeguard women and their honor. Women were forced to cover up in a *burqa* when in public and to wear shoes that did not make noise. Violations of such laws brought on a public caning. Also, if a house had a woman inhabitant, the front windows of that house had to be tinted or curtained.

In contrast to their strict beliefs, the Taliban profited from smuggling operations (primarily electronics) and opium cultivation. Eventually they bowed to international pressure and cracked down on cultivation and by July 2000 were able to claim that they had cut world opium production by two-thirds. Unfortunately, the crackdown on opium also abruptly deprived thousands of Afghans of their only source of income.

Although the Taliban managed to re-unite most of Afghanistan, they were unable to end the civil war. Nor did they improve the conditions in cities, where access to food, clean water, and employment actually declined during their rule. A continuing drought and a very harsh winter (2000–2001) brought famine and increased the flow of refugees to Pakistan.

The Taliban allowed terrorist organizations to run training camps in their territory and, from 1994 to at least 2001, provided refuge for Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda organization. The relationship between the Taliban and bin Laden is close, even familial—bin Laden fought with the *mujahideen*, has financed the Taliban, and has reportedly married one of his daughters to Mullah Muhammad Omar. The United Nations Security Council passed two resolutions, UNSCR 1267 (1999) and 1333 (2000), demanding that the Taliban cease their support for terrorism and hand over bin Laden for trial.

Adapted from: <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/taliban.html>



Afghan men wear a variety of turbans, and even within the Taliban, the strict Islamic government that controls much of the country, there are differences in the way men cover their heads. This Taliban member, for example, is wearing a very long turban (perhaps two twined together) with one end hanging loose over his shoulder. The Taliban ambassador to Afghanistan, on the other hand, favors a solid black turban tied above his forehead. And some men in Afghanistan do not wear turbans at all, but rather a distinctive Afghan hat.

Source: <http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/news/nation-world/infocus/mideast/islam/turbans.html>