



Formalities and Taboos in Afghanistan

Afghan culture is very different to Western culture, especially when it comes to interpersonal communication. This info sheet provides basic information on how to greet and communicate with Afghans when working in the field and as a guest in an Afghan home.

Formalities

Greetings in Afghanistan are much more formal than they are in the west and carry more meaning:

- **Shaking Hands:** During the initial greeting, Afghans usually (men with men) shake their hand and sometimes hug each other.
- **Greeting:** “Asalaamu Aleykum” is used as we would use hello, with the response of “aleykum asalaam.” This phrase means “peace be upon you” and is more significant than a greeting. Look the person in the eyes and say it clearly and audibly while you shake hands. It is polite to remove your sunglasses. If you are meeting a small group of people, you greet each person as you would an individual.
- **Wellbeing:** After the initial greeting, it is polite to ask how someone is. These phrases will differ between languages, but learning a few civilities from your interpreter will go a long way.
- **Farewell:** In Dari, the farewell “Khudo hafez” or “Ba Aman Khuda” are most common.
- **Tea:** In Afghan culture, you will often be invited for tea when you visit people, depending on the community and specific situation. If offered, it's polite to accept their invitation and this will also help you build trust with your hosts.



Photo: Heidi Carruba
Greetings and shaking hands are an important part of Afghan culture.



Photo: Dan Hilleman
Shoes should be removed before entering many rooms or buildings.



Photo: Dan Hilleman



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It is impolite to show the bottoms of your feet. In the image at left, Afghan men sit so that they do not point the bottoms of their feet towards others. Likewise, crossing your legs as shown at right could be considered offensive.

Cultural Taboos

Here are some of the major do's and don'ts:

- **Always shake hands** (men with men) during the initial greetings. If you don't like to be hugged—just shake their hands and say “Asalaamu Aleykum”.
- **Shoes:** Remove your shoes before entering a mosque, home or other rooms and buildings. You will clearly see where people leave their shoes at the door.
- **Feet:** Do not point the bottoms of your feet towards another, i.e., when in a room with a group of people, sit cross legged or in a similar manner that hides the bottom of your feet.
- **Dastarkhon:** When sitting around a *dastarkhon*, (a tablecloth laid out on the ground or floor around which you share a meal or tea), point the bottoms of your feet away from your hosts, do not place your feet on the cloth where food is placed, and do not lie down inappropriately.
- **Hand washing:** According to Afghan tradition, hands should always be washed before meals. Traditionally, a jar full of water will be presented for hand washing by the host. Sometimes a sink may be available for hand washing.
- **Right hand** is used for eating, the left hand should never touch food.
- **Holidays and prayers:** Respect Afghan and Muslim holidays as well as prayers. Most Muslims pray five times a day, while Friday prayers are the most important and when many people go to mosque. For more information about holidays, refer to: [IS Holidays in Afghanistan.pdf](#).

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