



Leader's introduction to Central Asia

If you find it difficult to name even one country in Central Asia, you're not alone. Most people draw a complete blank when asked about Central Asia. Many of the countries in Central Asia were once cloaked under the rule of the Soviet Union but now are distinct countries. Although mysterious to many, Central Asia is a fascinating and historically rich region.

Did you know?

There are more than 500 distinct people groups in Central Asia. Of course, you are probably familiar with the Afghan people, but have you ever heard of the Uzbek people?

Many of the names of Central Asian countries end with “-stan” which simply means “land.” So Uzbekistan is the land of the Uzbeks, Afghanistan is the land of the Afghans, etc. Central Asian peoples are not limited to their own “-stan,” however. Central Asian peoples can be found all over the world. Additionally, some people in Central Asia actually don't have a home country or their own language and culture. For example, the Uyghur (WEE-gur) people have their own language and culture but live predominantly in China. Following is a brief list of a few Central Asian peoples:

- Afghans
- Pashtuns of Afghanistan
- Uzbeks of Afghanistan
- Azeris
- Lezgis
- Persians of Azerbaijan
- Persians of Iran
- Kazakh and Uyghur of Kazakhstan
- Kurds of eastern Turkey, northern Iraq and Iran

The lands of Central Asia are almost as diverse as the people. Uzbekistan contains one of the world's largest deserts. Kyrgyzstan holds lush, green mountains, and Turkey's famed Istanbul is one of the world's largest megacities.

Very brief history

Much of Central Asia's history can be connected to its geography and weather. Because the land is difficult to farm, many of Central Asia's ancient peoples were nomadic, moving from one place to another in search of food for their animals. Also, since Central Asia is so far removed from the sea, trading was done mostly along the ancient “Silk Road,” a series of trading routes that stretched from France to China.

Because of the harsh terrain, some of the greatest horsemen in the world and, in turn, the most powerful military forces, were from Central Asia. Genghis Khan and his raiders learned to ride and fight in Central Asia. They were some of the most feared warriors in the world.

In more recent history, Russian culture has influenced Central Asia. The Soviet Union tried to exert control by sending Russians to live in places like Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.



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Central Asian culture

Central Asia has unique food, customs and cultures. During this study, you'll see glimpses of some of the cultural aspects of Central Asia. You will see the preparation of *lagman*, a special Central Asian noodle dish. You might also notice that people take their shoes off as they come into a house.

There are dozens of major languages spoken across Central Asia and even more local languages within the countries. Christian workers make a serious commitment when they decide to move to Central Asia because they often need to learn more than one language. Christian workers from outside of Central Asia often partner with local believers to reach the lost of the country.

Life in Central Asia

Life is often difficult in Central Asia. Most families have to work very hard in order to survive. People often live not just in physical poverty, but also in emotional dejection and hopelessness. Fathers and sons from small towns sometimes leave their families to work in the cities to support their families. Even though these men work grueling hours, they are generally unable to deliver their faraway loved ones from poverty and sadness.

Alcoholism, drug abuse, infidelity and abortion are sadly common in Central Asia. Life is hard for women in some Central Asian countries that discourage girls from going to school. In the villages, young boys often miss school because they must work to help support their families.

Life as a Muslim

Many Central Asian men go to their place of worship (the mosque) on Fridays. They recite rote prayers and carry out rituals. There are special rooms in mosques for women to pray, but many women choose to stay home and recite their prayers.

All Muslims are required to keep the following "five pillars" of Islam:

- 1 Proclaiming that there is only one god and that Muhammad is his prophet
- 2 Praying five times a day
- 3 Giving to the poor
- 4 Fasting during the month of Ramadan
- 5 Making a pilgrimage to Mecca (once in a lifetime)

Some Central Asians follow these pillars closely while others have a stronger belief in superstition or even atheism.

Life as a Muslim Background Believer (a former Muslim who chooses to follow Jesus)

If you are born into a Central Asian Muslim family, there is no option to choose your religion. Being Muslim is just as much a fact about yourself as having two feet and two hands. Leaving Islam is simply unthinkable. Of course, we know that God's work of redemption is miraculous in every person, but from a human perspective it is unmistakably only God's doing that a Muslim would have a change of heart.

Those who find their hope and salvation in Jesus Christ accept the persecution that goes with that decision. Upon making it known that they are followers of Jesus, many risk losing their families, jobs and even, at times, their very lives.



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How do these believers first hear the Gospel? The answer is varied. Some come to faith because of Christian workers sharing the Gospel with them. Others have come to faith because of the faithful witness of a Christian sibling or friend. Still others have come to faith while living abroad and local Christians lovingly took it upon themselves to share the Gospel with a foreigner.

Religious freedom in Central Asia

None of the countries in Central Asia have true freedom of religion. In fact, all countries in Central Asia have varying levels of hostility toward the Gospel and Christian evangelism. No one can work officially as a missionary. Because of this and other reasons, missionaries do not refer to themselves as such. They prefer the term “worker.” Because Christians can’t enter the country as missionaries, they must find creative ways to enter these closed countries. Many teach English and others offer humanitarian aid. As already mentioned, however, the real threat of danger comes when a national becomes a believer.

Thank you

Thank you for taking time to teach children in your church about Central Asia. Some of the videos on this Kids On Mission DVD may seem strange to you.

You may be wondering, “Why are the faces of the actors obscured?” This is because they are actually Christian workers who live in Central Asia. It is not always safe to share the Gospel of Jesus with people in Central Asia because many people and governments are hostile to the message of the Gospel. Also, sometimes Central Asian believers endure persecution for being associated with workers. Because of this, the actors’ faces are hidden to protect not only the workers, but also their Central Asian Christian friends.