

Afghanistan

Despite a challenging economic, social, geographic and security environment, Afghanistan has a competitive mobile market with a relatively high level of coverage.

Mobile services: The mobile market is highly competitive and dynamic, with six operators. The country's first mobile operator was the Afghan Wireless Communication Company, launched in 2002. A second operator, Roshan, was launched in 2003. In 2006, a third operator, Areeba, entered the marketplace and was subsequently purchased by the South Africa-based MTN Group and renamed as MTN Afghanistan. Etisalat Afghanistan became the country's fourth mobile operator in 2007. Afghan Telecom (AFTEL), the incumbent State-owned fixed-line operator, was awarded a mobile licence and launched its mobile service in 2014 under the Salaam brand. AFTEL is a unified licence holder. This steady increase in competition has boosted mobile access, with 90 per cent of Afghan homes having a mobile phone. In March 2012, 3G mobile broadband was launched, and uptake has been growing. LTE pilot services were launched by the mobile network operators in 2017, with total investment amounting to USD 2.4 billion.

Fixed services: AFTEL was established under presidential decree in 2005. Landline telephones are limited and most investment, particularly in rural areas, has been in fixed wireless CDMA. Afghan Telecom is the main fixed-line provider, while Wasel Telecom launched wireless fixed lines in several northern provinces in 2006. The company upgraded its license to national service in 2014. There are few broadband fixed subscriptions owing to limited availability and high costs. ADSL is offered in urban areas as well as fixed wireless broadband provided by Afghan Telecom. Two operators are providing WiMAX services, while 62 national and local ISPs are providing Internet services in the country. Construction of a national fibre-optic backbone was begun in 2007 by Afghan Telecom. AFTEL was the first operator permitted to own and sell access to the optical fibre cable (OFC) backbone, and the company installed a 4 700 km OFC network, with seven international connectivity points with neighbouring countries. As per the 2016 open access policy, the monopoly on OFC networks was eliminated and four other companies, including three existing MNOs, were allowed to install their own OFC network in the country.

Government policy: The Telecommunications Services Regulation Act (Telecom Act) was adopted

Key indicators for Afghanistan (2017)	Asia & Pacific	World	
Fixed-telephone sub. per 100 inhab.	0.3	9.5	13.0
Mobile-cellular sub. per 100 inhab.	67.4	104.0	103.6
Active mobile-broadband sub. per 100 inhab.	16.0	60.3	61.9
3G coverage (% of population)	24.0	91.3	87.9
LTE/WiMAX coverage (% of population)	0.0	86.9	76.3
Individuals using the Internet (%)	11.4	44.3	48.6
Households with a computer (%)	3.4	38.9	47.1
Households with Internet access (%)	5.7	49.0	54.7
International bandwidth per Internet user (kbit/s)	11.6	61.7	76.6
Fixed-broadband sub. per 100 inhab.	0.05	13.0	13.6
Fixed-broadband sub. by speed tiers, % distribution			
<i>-256 kbit/s to 2 Mbit/s</i>	50.8	2.4	4.2
<i>-2 to 10 Mbit/s</i>	1.6	7.6	13.2
<i>-equal to or above 10 Mbit/s</i>	47.6	90.0	82.6

Note: Data in italics are ITU estimates. Source: ITU (as of June 2018).

in 2005, resulting in the formation of the Afghanistan Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (ATRA) in 2006, as a board with an independent organizational structure and separate budget to regulate the telecommunication sector in Afghanistan. The Telecom Act was amended in 2017, enhancing the regulatory body functions in an independent, open, objective, transparent and non-discriminatory manner within the legal framework in the country. As per the Telecom Act, ATRA issues licenses to telecom companies and supervises the overall performances of these companies on a regular basis to assure compliance with policies, procedures and the law. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology is responsible for policy-making and implementing the ICT Policy (2015–2024), while ATRA regulates the telecommunication sector and manages the telecom universal service fund (Telecommunications Development Fund). ATRA is committed to implementing international best practices and creating a fully transparent regulatory environment, with the vision of a fully competitive telecom marketplace throughout Afghanistan that ensures wide availability of ICT services at reasonable prices, facilitates access to public services and resources, enhances educational and social development and connects all the citizens.

Conclusion: Despite security, economic and geographical challenges, Afghanistan has made notable progress in extending access to the population, primarily through mobile communications, which have spread rapidly owing to a vibrant and competitive market.