Afghanistan sits at the hub of three great cultural zones. Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and the Iranian plateau extend to its borders and builders of empires through time have coveted the area for its central position on the lucrative trade routes that link one zone to the other. Some who travelled these routes merely passed through; others remained to embellish luminous cities; still others, escaping upheaval in their homelands, found in this land a haven. Whatever the manner of their coming, each impressed his own cultural preferences on the society. The Afghan area thus evolved as a zone of cultural transition.

Landmarks on the fading palimpsest of Afghanistan’s 5000 years of history tell of Darius I of Iran in the 6th c. B.C., of Alexander the Macedonian in the 4th c. B.C., of India’s stellar King Ashoka in the 3rd c. B.C., and of Kanishka of Central Asian stock whose Empire in the 2nd c. B.C. extended from northern India to the Gobi Desert. At Bamiyan in the central mountains stand the world’s largest Buddhist figures carved when Afghanistan was the conduit for the transmission of Buddhism and its art forms from India to the Far East along the world’s most fabled route of commerce, the Silk Route, during the early centuries A.D. In Ghazni lies the tomb of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi who carried the message of Islam to the Indian subcontinent at the end of the 10th c. and in Herat 15th century Timurid monuments of unsurpassed beauty speak of a renascence, a Golden Age, following the catastrophic passage of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane in the 13th and 14th centuries. Their descendant, Babur, founder of the Moghul Empire in India (16th-17th A.D.), lies buried on a hillside at Kabul. The tomb of the first Afghan empire builder, Ahmad Shah Durrani of Kandahar (1747-1772) dominates the major southern city of Kandahar.

With all this coming and going, there developed a complex ethnolinguistic population as varied as its geography with plains and grasslands in the north, a central mountain core and deserts and semideserts in the west and southwest. The Pashto-speaking Pushtun, representing slightly less than one-half the population, are concentrated mainly in the east and south where kindred tribes live across the border in Pakistan. The Persian-speaking Tajik, occupying valleys north of Kabul, as well as plains and mountains in the northeast, form the next largest group. These are followed by the Turkic-speaking Uzbak and Turkoman whose yurts and villages are scattered all along the northern borders separating them from their kin in Central Asia.
The Hazara, occupying remote valleys on the central plateau called the Hazarajat, speak Hazaragi, a distinct dialect of Persian. The Baluch in the southwest speak Baluchi, and the Persian-speaking Farsiwan in the northwest each have ties with Iran, as do the Aimaq whose language also includes a substantial Turkic vocabulary. The Brahui living with the Baluch in the deserts of the southwest, and the Nuristani settled in the wooded eastern mountains both speak distinct languages all their own.

The only basic constant between these different peoples is religion, Islam. But even in Islam they are distinct. About 80% are Hanifi Sunni; the rest of the population are Imami or Ismailiya Shia. Small, prosperous pockets of Hindus and Sikhs cluster in the major towns and cities. Importantly, even within the major schools of Islam no uniform doctrine is practiced in Afghanistan. Interpretations differ widely and no religious or state institution imposes unity of belief.

Pushtun dominance of Afghan state affairs began with Ahmad Shah Durrani in the 18th c. and their paramount position under the Pushtun Mohammadzai lineage endured until April 1978 when the current upheaval began. Local contests for power in the nineteenth century were exacerbated by foreign interests mirroring those roiling Afghanistan today. As imperialist Czarist Russia pushed relentlessly south through Central Asia and the British Empire in India moved persistently north, their attempts to influence local leaders aggravated internal disorder, impeding unification. Twice, in 1839 and 1879, the British invaded. Twice, they were violently ejected.

The British left Afghanistan in 1880, committing the kingdom of Kabul to Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (1880-1901). But they retained control over the conduct of his foreign affairs and both Russia and Britain marked his boundaries. Amir Abdur Rahman’s determined efforts to form a centralized state shaped state policies even as relations with other nations expanded following Independence in 1919. From this time forward, until 1978, Afghanistan adhered to a policy of neutral non-alignment. Nevertheless, the needs of modernization involved the nation in international geo-political maneuvering epitomized by the Cold War which culminated in April 1978 with a coup d'état by leftist leaders and invasion by Soviet troops in December 1979.

Since then the populace has been seared by violence launched by their own fractious leaders. Soviet troops departed Afghanistan in February 1989 but because of their own power struggles, the leadership of the Islamic State of Afghanistan, which replaced the leftist regime in April 1992, has proved to be as inept in garnering the confidence of their people as their predecessors. Over a third of the Afghan population still live as refugees in Iran and Pakistan; upwards of half a million urban displaced live in villages or tented settlements inside Afghanistan. Spirals of conflict continue.