

Afghan Political Culture



Lessons from History



- NUMBERED PROVINCES**
1. PARWAN
 2. KAPISA
 3. LAGHMĀN
 4. KUNAR
 5. NANGĀRHĀR
 6. PAKIYYA
 7. LOGAR
 8. WARDĀK
 9. KĀBUL
 10. KHŌST
 11. NŪRISTĀN
 12. PANJSHAYK

Height in metres above Sea Level

200 500 1000 1500 2000

- International Boundary
- Province Boundary
- Pakistan Administered & Kashmir Boundary
- Line of Control
- Capital City
- Provincial Capital
- Town
- Main Road
- Other Road
- Track
- Railway
- Perennial Drainage
- Seasonal Drainage
- Canal
- Marsh
- Major Airfields
- Graded Earth/Gravel

Herat Bost

Approx. Scale

0 50 100 150 200

INDIA

Afghanistan, cradle of civilisations

Bactria densely inhabited in the Stone Age.

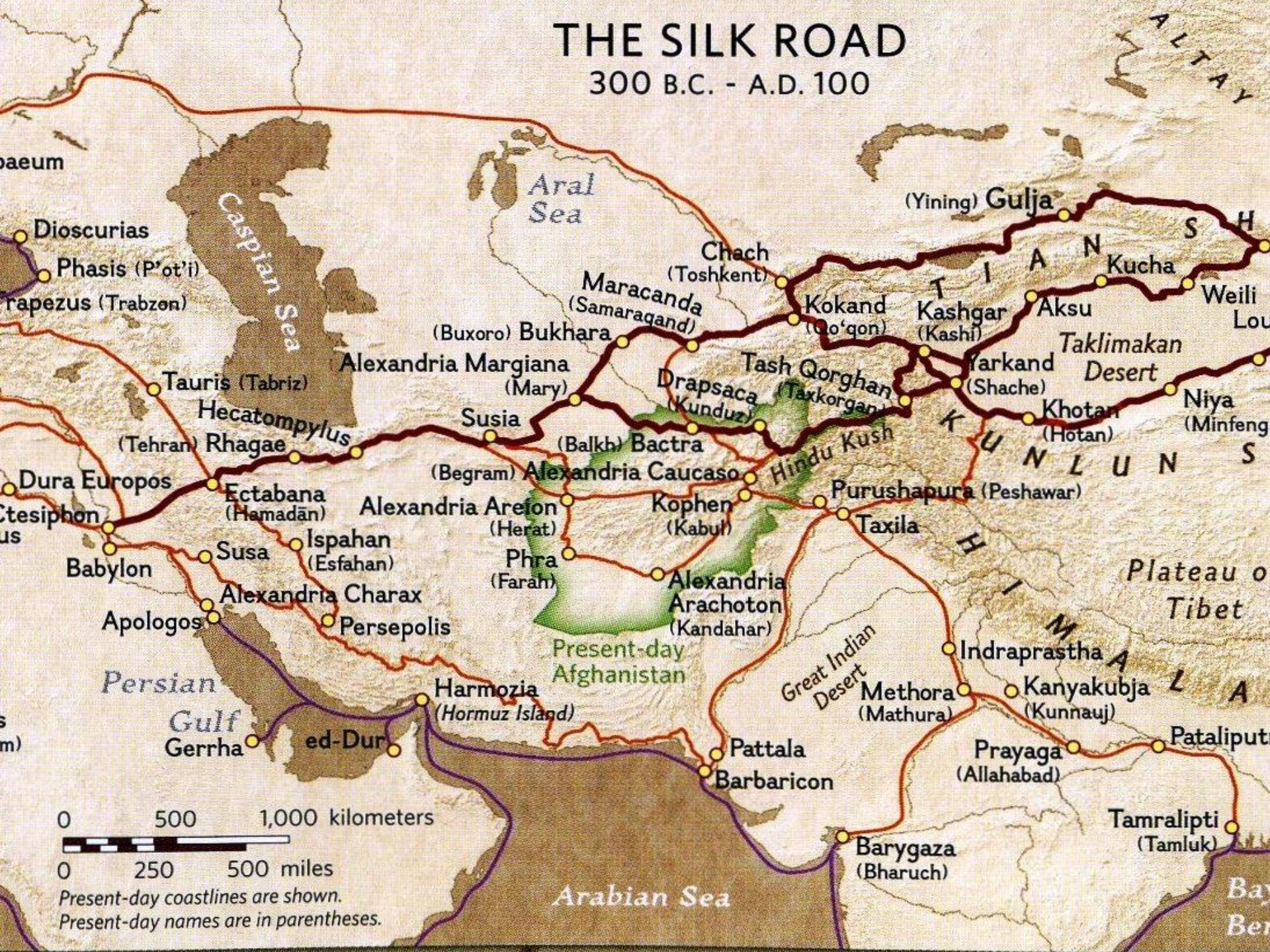
Possible birthplace of Aryan race / Indo-European language group

Oxus Civilization, bronze age 2200-1700 BC,
connected to Indus Valley Civilisation 2000BC (near Kandahar)



THE SILK ROAD

300 B.C. - A.D. 100



Achaemenid Empire
(Cyrus, Darius)

Alexander the Great
(Iskandar) 332 BC
Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-
e Sharif

Greco-Bactrian empire,
Bactra

Maurya Empire
Chandragupta & Ashoka

Parthian Empire

Sassanid Empire

Kushan Kings



Zoroastrianism (monotheism)
State, Law, administration

Population transfers from
Greece (Hellenism)
Start of 'Silk Road'

Medicine & Science
Urbanism & arts
Philosophy
Civil service
Profitable trade
with India, China
Levant & Rome

Revival of Iranian
culture in combination
with nomadic, Greek
and other influences

Religious syncretism with
emphasis on Zoroastrianism

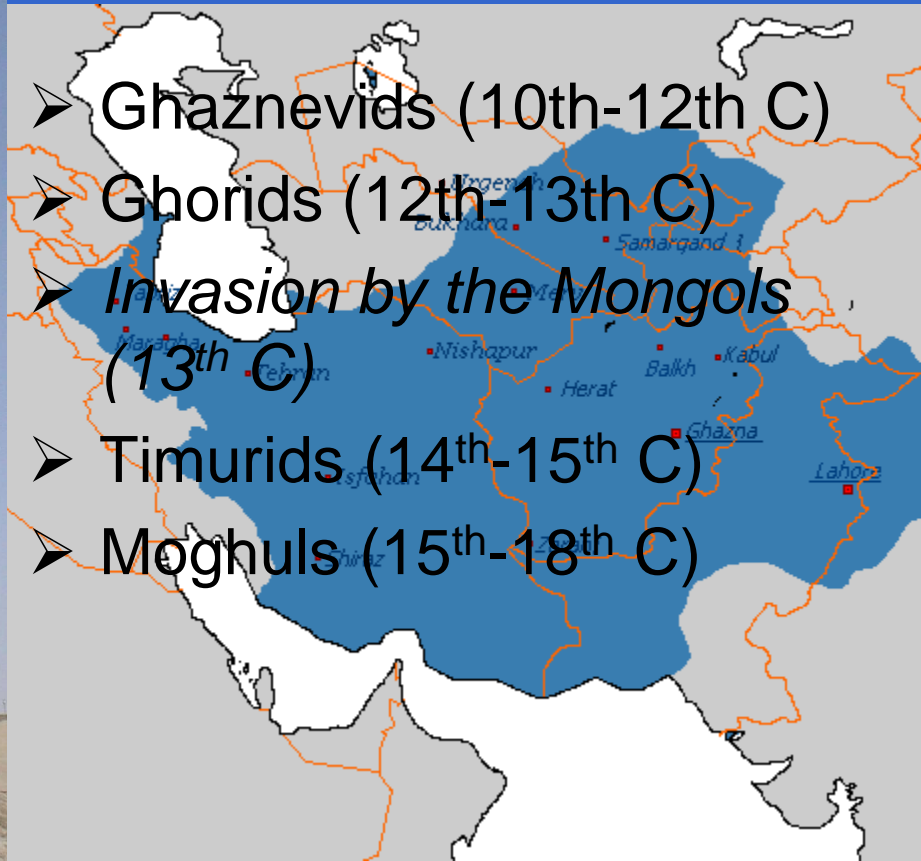
Afghanistan = conduit for the spread of Buddhism



Afghanistan: sword of the Islam

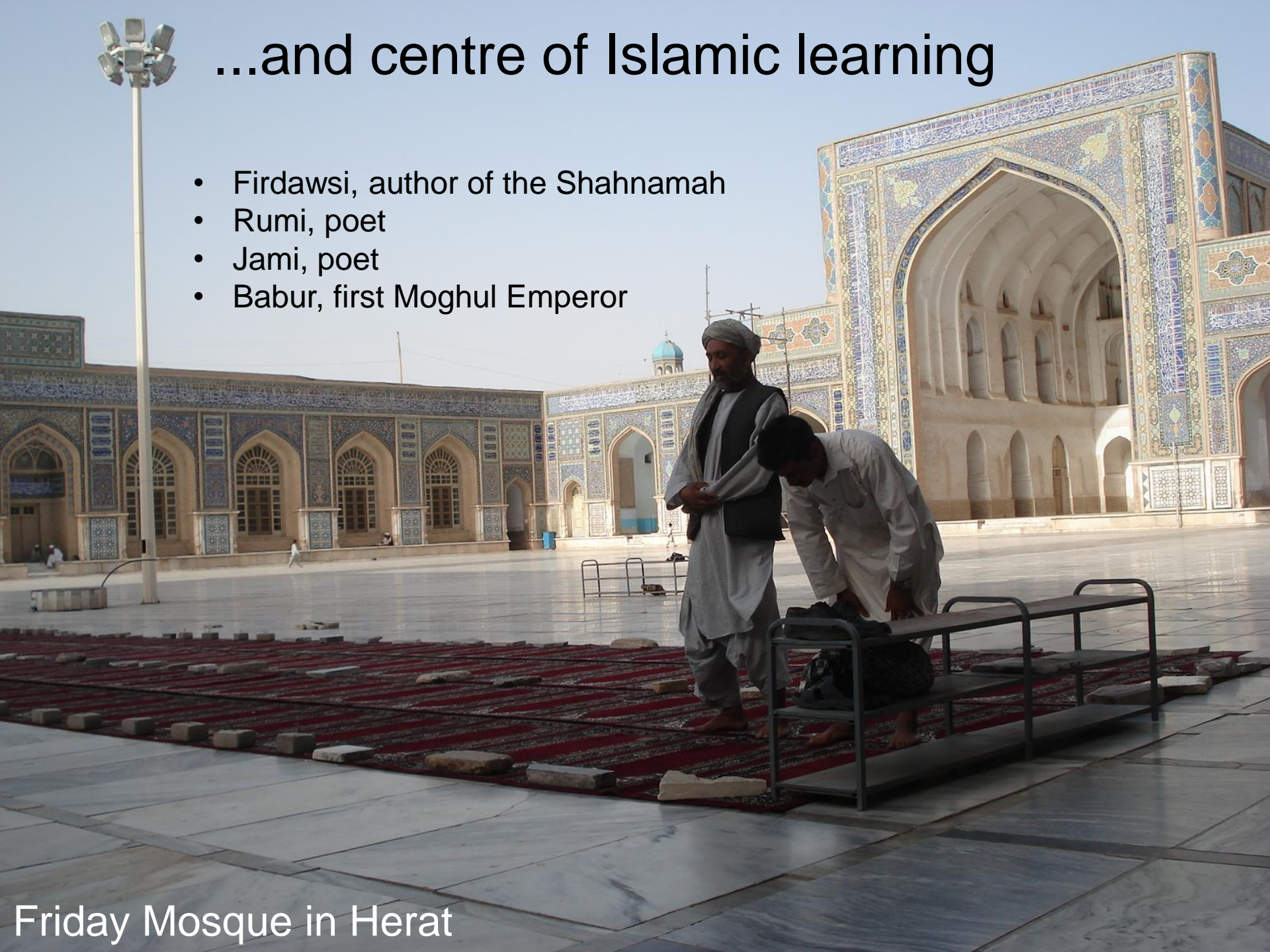
- Ghaznevids (10th-12th C)
- Ghorids (12th-13th C)
- *Invasion by the Mongols*
(13th C)
- Timurids (14th-15th C)
- Moghuls (15th-18th C)

Minaret of Sultan Mas'ud in Ghazni



...and centre of Islamic learning

- Firdawsi, author of the Shahnamah
- Rumi, poet
- Jami, poet
- Babur, first Moghul Emperor



Friday Mosque in Herat

Afghans are aware of sharing an ancient, illustrious history

- Pre-Islamic period: syncretism, tolerance, trade and transmission of culture
 - The ancestors of the Afghans both influenced and were influenced by the many civilizations that succeeded each other
 - Religious mix: Monotheistic (Zoroastrian), Polytheistic (Hellenistic, Hindu), animist and Buddhist
- Islamic period: centre of regional propagation
 - Base for the spread of Islam in South and Central Asia (Sufi brotherhoods). Warrior fame
 - Contribution to Islamic arts and sciences

1747: Afghanistan founded by Ahmad Shah Durrani

- i.e. not a buffer state
- Confederation of Pashtun (Durrani) tribes
- No state structures
- Charismatic leadership
- Reward & punish
- 'Ghazi' tradition of conquest
- Opportunistic alliances with foreign powers (GB)



The first and second Anglo-Afghan wars

Afghanistan escapes colonization (but also its benefits)
Great Britain however largely manages the destiny of Afghanistan until 1919



Sayyid Jamaluddin Afghani (Al Afghani)

1838 (Iran) – 1897



One of the first Pan-Islamists, calling for reform in the Muslim world.

Traveled and worked in Iran, Afghanistan, India, Constantinople, Cairo and Paris.

Born Shia, but called himself Sunni (Afghani), not practicing Muslim.

His remains are in a mausoleum in Kabul University.

- ❖ Pan-Islamism: Muslims must react to Western imperialism by uniting
- ❖ Islamic reform: Islam is not antithetical to reason and must embrace science, although he rejects materialism.
- ❖ Just rulers: Al Afghani did not advocate political reform per se, but urged Muslims to overthrow rulers who are incapable of defending their people

1880: Creation of the Afghan State



- **Borders determined by British**
- **Modernization in response to external pressure**
- **State institutions to control territory: army, ministries, bureaucracy, taxation...**

Pashtun predominance

Deliberate mixing of ethnic groups

- **Nascent urban middle class**
- **Modernist & pan-Islamic ideologies**
- **Reaction by tribal, conservative society**

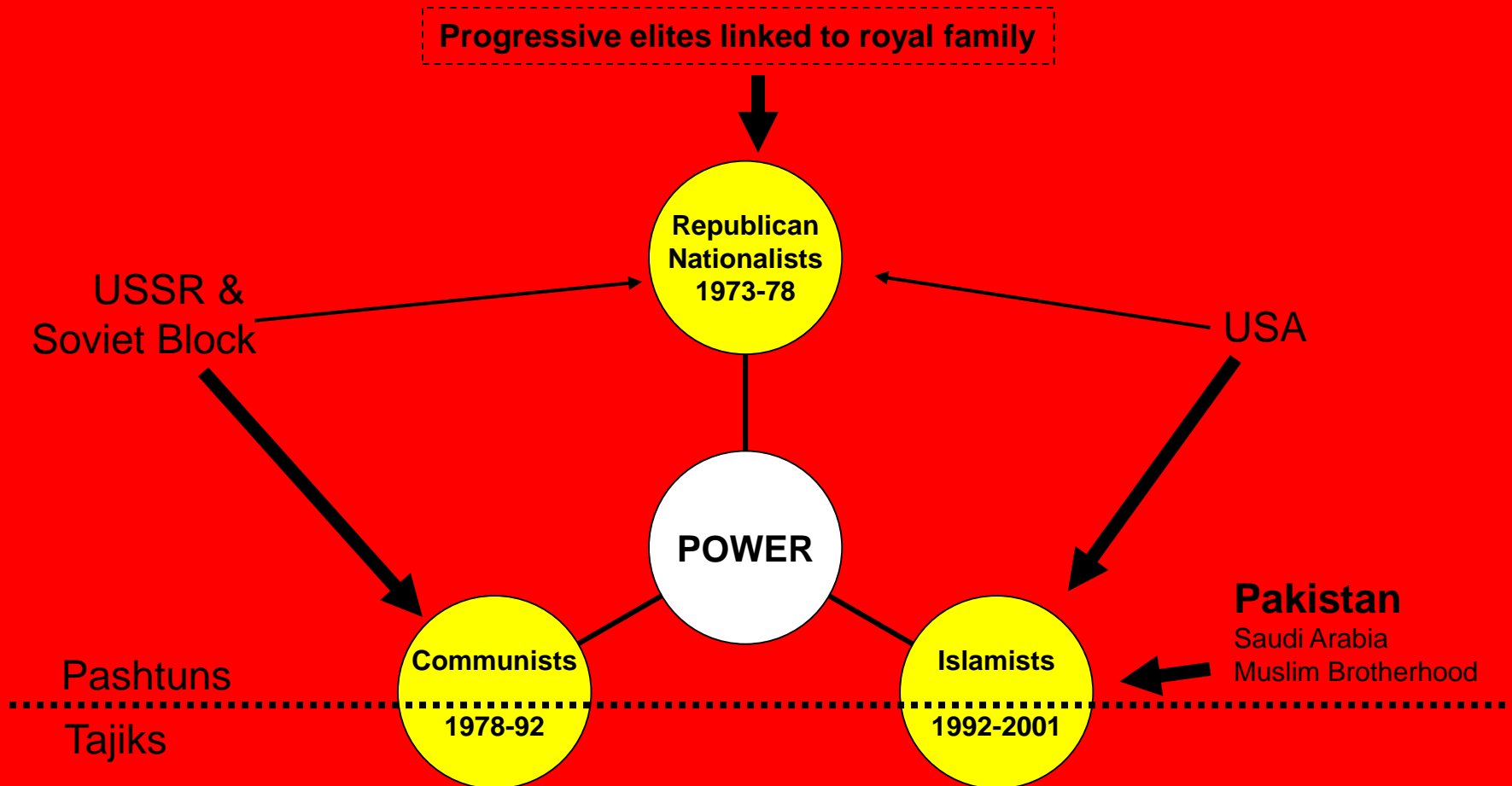


1929-1973: Consolidation

- Repression of progressives & independents
- Pashtun nationalism as state ideology
- Strengthening system of royal patronage
- Incremental reforms benefit privileged only
- Neutrality politics during Cold War (growing influence of USA & USSR nonetheless)
- 1947+ Pashtunistan issue (tensions with Pakistan)



Modernizing forces 1960s & 70s



1973 Coup by Prime Minister Daud – King Zahir Shah deposed



President Daud, figurehead of Afghan modernizing forces impatient with the pace of reform, creates a republic with a new constitution

As a Mohammedzai (nephew of the King) he does not threaten the existing ethnic balance.

Rapprochement with the USA but especially with the USSR for aid.



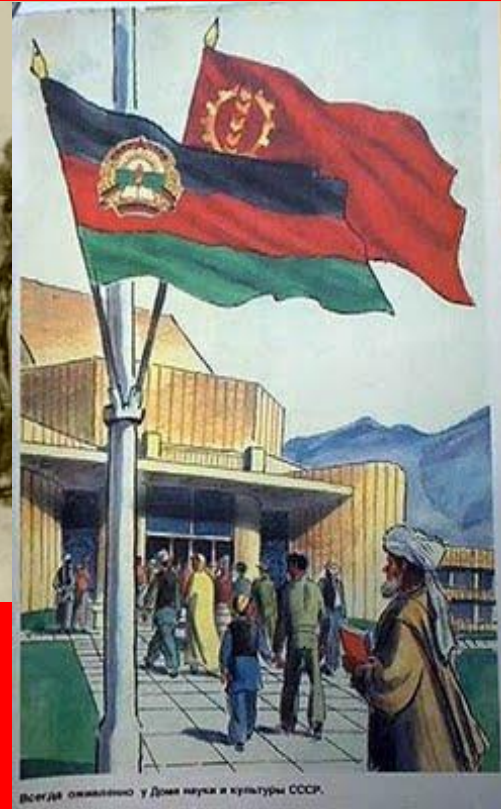
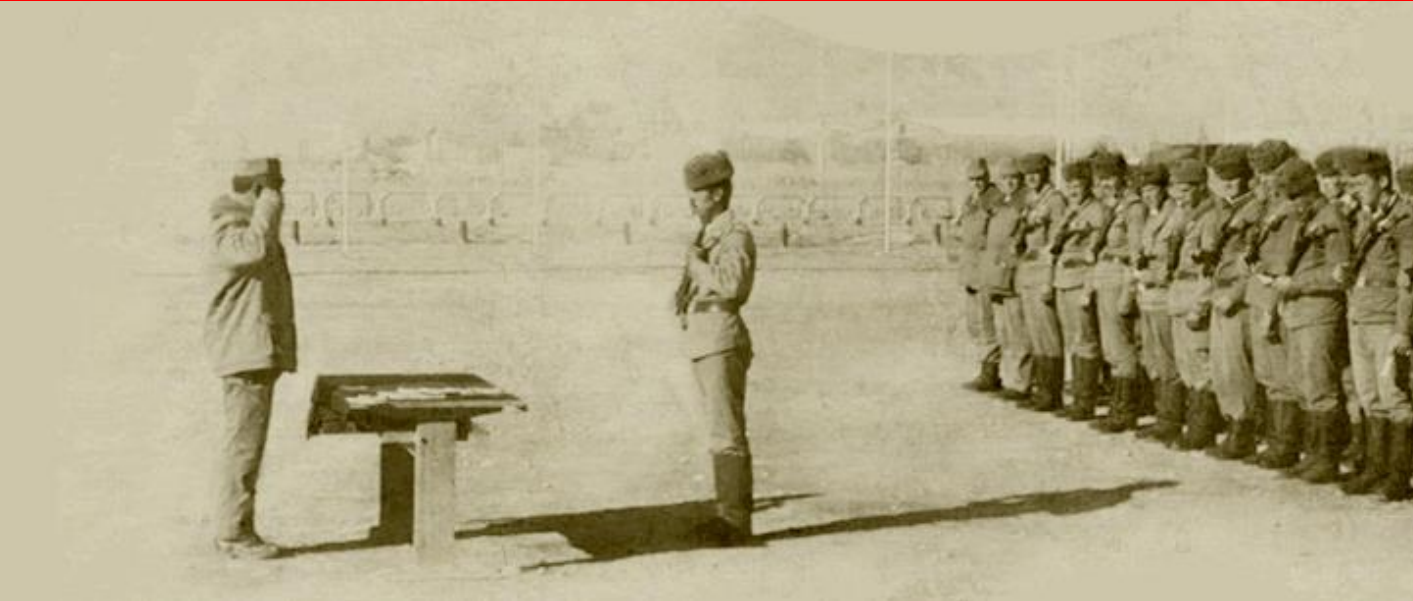
Daud unleashes social forces and creates expectations he cannot satisfy
Increasing strength of Moscow-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), divided along ethnic lines (Pashtun Parchamis vs Tajik Khalqis), but also of Islamist parties

1978 Coup by the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan



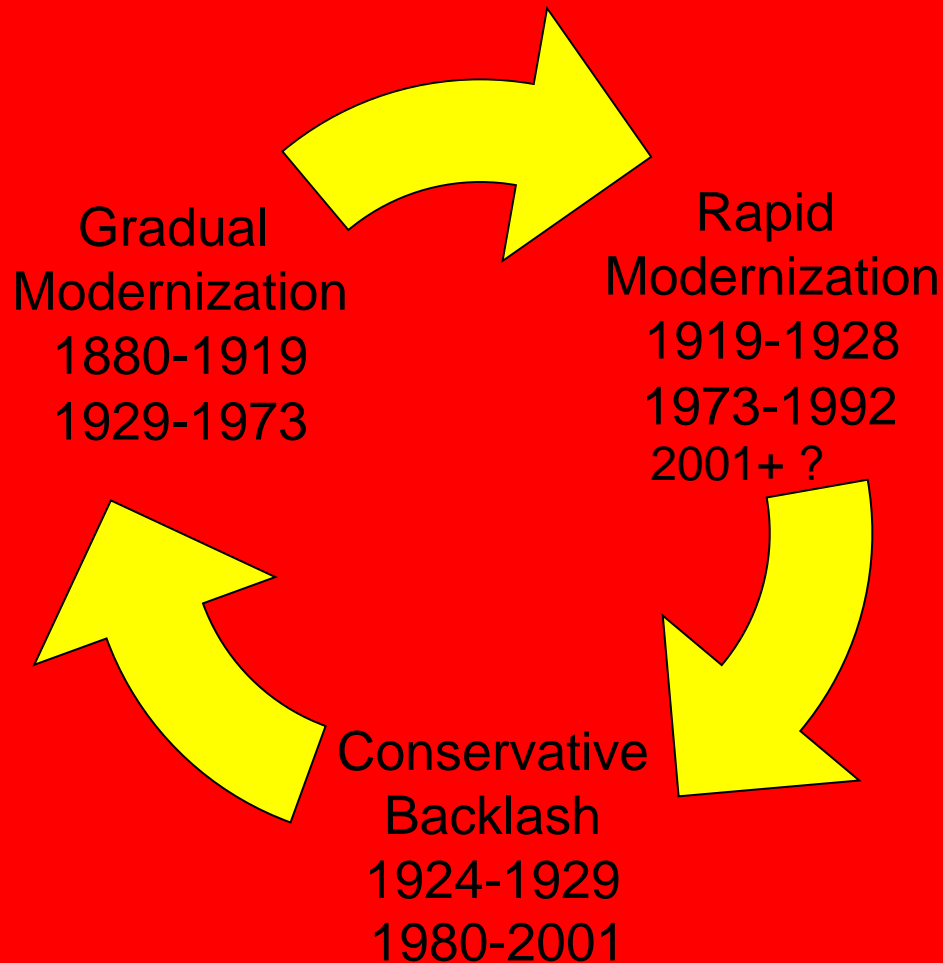


1973-1992: Rush forward



- **Superpower rivalry stokes conflict**
- **Massive foreign aid replaces traditional power base**
- ⇒ **Decline of traditional social forces**
 - **seek accommodation with Kabul**
 - **join (and taint) Islamic resistance**
 - **or flee into exile**
 - = traditional patronage networks in constant upheaval/under threat**
- ⇒ **Progressive forces decimated in waves or flee into exile**

Cycle of Modernization & Backlash



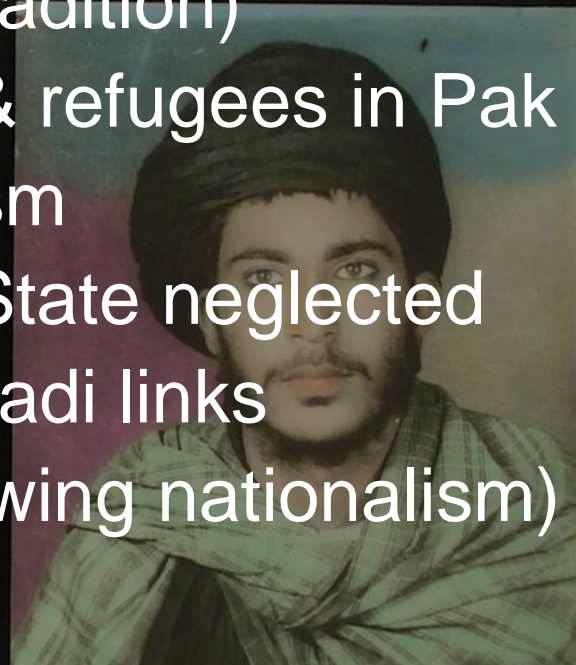
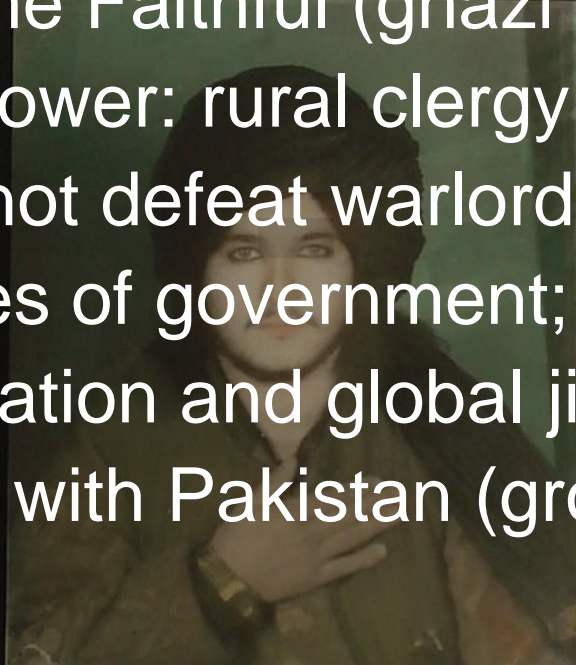
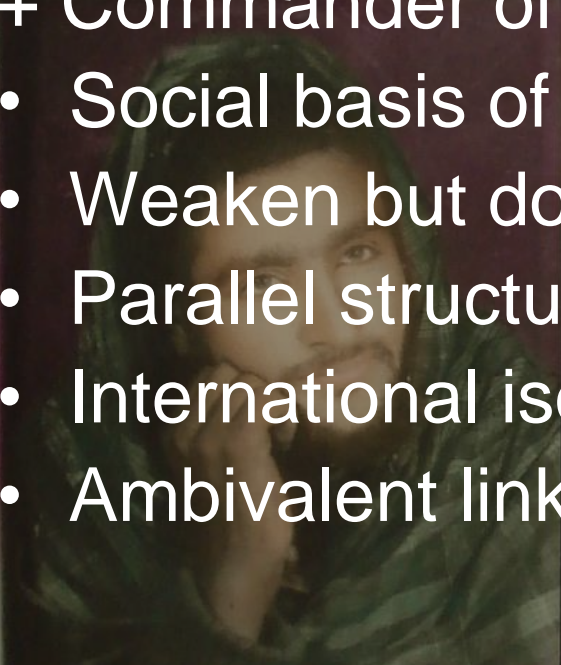
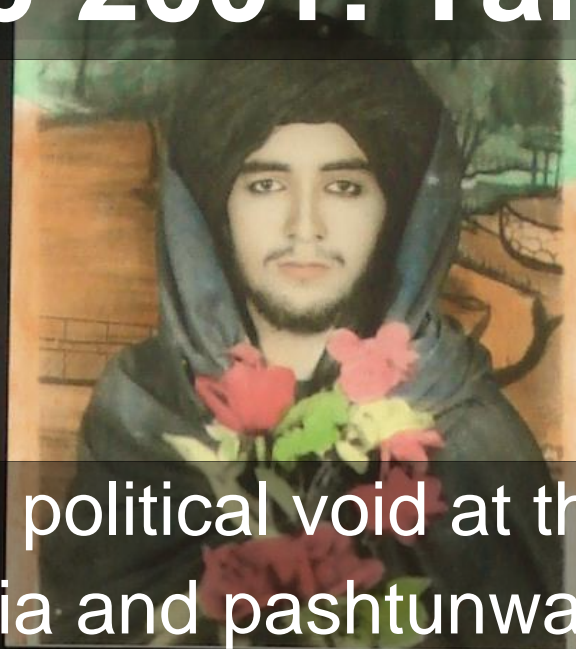
1992-1996: Disintegration

- **1991 disappearance of Soviet Union**
- **State and its resources looted.**
- **Kabul destroyed**
- **Warlord rule established (drugs & smuggling)**
- **Traditional forces adapt or are sidelined**
- **International community disengages except Pakistan**



1996-2001: Taliban

- Taliban step into political void at the community level
- Legitimacy: sharia and pashtunwali (law and order)
- + Commander of the Faithful (ghazi tradition)
- Social basis of power: rural clergy & refugees in Pak
- Weaken but do not defeat warlordism
- Parallel structures of government; State neglected
- International isolation and global jihadi links
- Ambivalent links with Pakistan (growing nationalism)



Afghan political culture: lessons from history

The state has never been a strong institution and cannot be used to transform society

Leadership charismatic, personal and permanently contested

Leadership in Pashtun hands; importance of Kandahar

Authority based on ability to reward loyalty and punish dissent

State power relies on negotiation with traditional power base and channeling of progressive forces

To ensure acquiescence by traditional forces the leadership needs to present itself as defender of the Islam and respect the Pashtun code

Reliance on external sources of power is self-defeating

There is no monopoly of violence. To project its power the state needs to rally armed forces around a 'just Islamic cause' and/or the spoils of war

Ethnic political praxis and use of patronage networks are a prerequisite for power but ethnic political objectives are not acceptable at a national level

Synthesis: Afghan Political Culture

A set of constants

- Pashtun and male rule
- importance of ethnic ties
- brutality against opponents
- conservative Islam
- reject interference from Western countries.

⇒ Orientalist view

⇒ Isolationist policies

Evolutionary view

- Erosion of the social base of traditional power – including royalty, tribes and clergy
 - rise and fall of successive modernist ideologies with expanding popular base
 - increasing penetration by global culture of Afghan society: urbanization and emancipation
- ⇒ Support and manipulation of group which reflects foreign priorities
- ⇒ Deracination of this group -> backlash

Western policies fluctuate between both approaches

THE CURRENT POLITICAL SET-UP IS THE RESULT OF THE INTERNATIONAL INTERVENTION

Afghan state building in the twenty-first century was fatally flawed because it attempted to restore a system designed for autocrats in a land where autocracy was no longer politically sustainable. The international community assumed that such a system would be considered legitimate if validated by elections.

But Afghanistan had its own political traditions, in which elections played no part, and the virtues of majoritarian rule were not immediately obvious to the country's regional and ethnic minorities. Moreover, talk of democracy was difficult to reconcile with just how little power was delegated to any institution not part of the central government. The constitution of 2004 created a government barely distinguishable from the centralized monarchies and dictatorships that had characterized earlier regimes.

The Role of *Culture* in the intervention, and visions of change in Afghan society

Commonly stated in documents and discussions with international actors: Afghan culture is to blame for the lack of good results from Western good intentions



Afghans backward
<= Islam?
<= Tribal culture?
<= Lack of education?



We must help them develop (transform their culture)
the liberal left argument for engagement

versus

They want to be left alone and follow their own path
The populist right argument for disengagement

Cultural Bias

No investigation of Afghan culture
Only **assumptions** (i.e. value judgments)

Implicit: **Western culture is universal**
This value judgment is a cultural phenomenon

Western stereotypes of the Afghan



1975: Friendly and laid back mountain dweller with a beautiful culture

1985: Fierce and noble but deeply conservative and religious *freedom fighter*



2005: Lazy, corrupt and chaotic 'Oriental' living off Western aid



1995: Poor hapless starving victim



2015?

Common points:

- Rural, deeply religious and conservative
- Unruly individuals incapable of sacrificing their individual liberty for the common good (no social contract)
- Ethnically divided, tribal, belligerent



Contemporary Culture > Traditional Culture

Youth:

68% Afghan population < 25 years

Exposure:

- 20 tot 25% Afghan population returned from exile
- Information technology
- Western-educated elites
- Soviet experience

**Traditional culture
weakened by civil war**





Kabul Constitutions



