

## **Monumental Threat in Herat**

**Author:** [IWPR Afghanistan](#)

Blocked budgets in Kabul starve western city of the funding needed to keep architecture treasures standing.

The ornate blue tiles of Mullah-ye-Kalan, a Muslim shrine in the western province of Herat, are lit up by sunshine. But the only reason the light comes flooding in is that the roof of this historic building has fallen in.

Mullah-ye-Kalan is a 16th century “khanaqa”, a centre for the mystical Sufi strand of Islam, and is only one of three historic buildings in Ziarat Gah, 15 kilometres south of Herat. But the two 600-year-old mosques and the khanaqa have all suffered damage during the mujahedin war with the Soviet military in the Eighties, and the internecine strife between Afghan factions that followed.

In Ziarat Gah – a village whose very name means “place of pilgrimage” – people value the buildings for their religious as well as historical associations, and local residents have managed to carry out some repairs to the Gunbad mosque by themselves. But the walls of the other mosque, Chehel Setun, remain in a state of partial collapse, and officials at Herat region’s department for the preservation of historic monuments warn that the khanaqa will fall down altogether if nothing is done to repair it soon.

Ayamuddin Ajmal, acting head of the department, said many other historical monuments across Herat region were under threat because his office was too strapped for cash to carry out renovations.

The preservation department used to receive an allocation from the customs revenue the province earns as Afghanistan’s main gateway to Iran. But this funding source had dried up, and Ajmal said the Afghan government should realise the consequences of this before it was too late.

“Our department used to get two per cent of the income of the Herat customs department, but they stopped giving us that amount last year,” he said.

Wali Shah Bahra, head of the provincial office of the information, culture and youth ministry whose remit includes historic buildings, said that apart from the three buildings in Ziarat Gah, there were several even older buildings in Herat province dating back 900 years to the Ghaznavid dynasty which are close to collapse.

“Although we have put these matters to the [central] information ministry and several other organisations, they have not paid any attention to these problems yet,” he said. “If the situation continues like this, many historical monuments will be destroyed.”

In Kabul, the deputy information, culture and youth minister Omar Sultan confirmed that funding was currently unavailable. “There is no money to spend on preserving historical monuments as the Afghan development and ordinary budget has still not passed by the parliament,” he told IWPR by telephone.

Sultan said his ministry, working with the United Nations’ cultural agency UNESCO, planned to repair 20 historical monuments across Afghanistan. UNESCO has already carried out some work to stabilise the most precariously leaning minaret in a group of five dating from the early 15th century. But with 200 historic

buildings recorded in Herat province alone, there is much to be done.

Some Afghans feel a personal sense of responsibility to preserve the past in the face of what they regard as official neglect.

Abdul Salam Noori, a teacher at the Ustad Kamaluddin Behzad school in Herat, said it was the responsibility of both government and people to look after the old buildings that embody their identity as a nation.

As an example, Noori recalled how he notified the regional preservation department of the imminent collapse of the Bridge of Malan, which is many centuries old and still serves the practical purpose of connecting the Anjil and Guzra districts with Herat city.

“When I didn’t get any response from the department, I put the matter to a few journalists,” he said. “After a few days, some organisations took steps to prevent the bridge from falling down.” The organisations that Noori’s intervention helped bring to the bridge’s rescue were the United Nations Office for Project Services, the Afghan ministry of public Works and a local construction company called Huma.

Apart from general decay, Afghanistan’s heritage has suffered greatly from years of war, most but not all of it recent.

Cultural vandalism is nothing new for Herat. Bahauddin Baha, a local archaeologist and researcher on the region’s architectural heritage, recalled how the British army deliberately destroyed most of Herat’s finest mosque complex in 1885, to gain a tactical advantage against a Russian attack that never came.

The devastated buildings dated from the city’s cultural renaissance in the 15th century, when there was an unparalleled flowering of architecture and literature under a succession of Timurid rulers.

“These buildings were deliberately destroyed on the orders of the British who feared the Russians would use them as strongholds,” he said.

Of the nine giant minarets that survived the destruction in 1885, four have subsequently fallen down because of earthquakes and long-term neglect.

At the preservation department, Ajmal is still optimistic that one day, what is left of Herat’s heritage may provide for its own upkeep through tourist revenues.

“Before the civil wars, we used to make money from the historic monuments. Tourists would come to the province and the government earned money from them, income which covered the expenses of keeping up the monuments,” he said.

As well as the minarets, Ajmal said the top earners used to be Herat’s great Jami mosque, dating from 1200, the old town area, the Qala-e-Ikhtiaruddin citadel, and Guzargah-e-Sharif, site of the tomb of Khwaja Abdullah Ansari, a famous Sufi thinker from the 11th century.

According to Ajmal, “If the way is opened for tourists to come to the province again, a major part of our problems with preserving the historical monuments will be solved.”

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