



PRESS RELEASE — FEBRUARY 20, 2021

Afghan Peace Talks:

ARCH International's Letter Unites Delegations Around the Issue of Cultural Heritage

Government of Afghanistan and the Taliban Issue Statements in Support of the Protection of Afghanistan's Heritage

The U.S.-based nonprofit [ARCH International](#), concerned for Afghanistan's rich and multi-layered cultural heritage, in October 2020, **launched a petition** requesting the two parties to the peace negotiations to commit to the protection of their country's heritage sites.

Since then, the **Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan** has made the topic integral to their peace talks agenda and has thanked and acknowledged ARCH for their campaign.

On February 20, 2021 **the Taliban** published their own statement highlighting their commitment to the protection and preservation of Afghanistan's historic sites and artifacts. They went beyond the request and added an order to their commanders in the field, instructing them to prevent looting of antiquities.

Why this matters:

In 2001, the Taliban destroyed the ancient, colossal Buddha statues of Bamiyan. The fact that they now signed on to and even exceeded a request to guarantee the protection of cultural heritage would, if they honor this commitment, be a true sea change.

The fact that both sides in the peace talks were able to agree on this issue, is also a hopeful sign that they can find common ground on sensitive issues.

Timeline

October 2020 – ARCH delivers the [petition letter](#) to both negotiating teams in Doha: Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the Taliban. Many supporting voices from inside Afghanistan lend their [weight](#).

November 11, 2020 – *ITV News* is the first to [cover](#) ARCH's petition. The article is published in English, Dari and Pashto. ARCH also contacts *ToloNews*, *Ariana*, and *VOA*. Many news outlets subsequently write about the issue including a longform video [reportage](#) on VOA Pashtu.



November 26, 2020 – ARCH is notified by the President’s Office of Ashraf Ghani in an email, that its request was accepted by the government team. An official press release from November 26, 2020, [states](#): “The Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has taken into account the request of ARCH International on preservation of cultural heritages of Afghanistan and attaches great importance to the issues in the peace negotiations.”

December 15, 2020 – *ToloNews* reports that the Afghan government’s peace talks agenda proposal now includes:

(1) "Ensuring the security of historical and Islamic sites" and (2) "The legitimate rights and freedoms of citizens and preserving the achievements of Afghans."

January 2021 – ARCH sends a letter to Dr. Ali Al-Qaradaghi, Secretary General, International Alliance of Muslim Scholars (IAMS), requesting a theological view of the issue. In a thoughtful response, the scholar explains that heritage, as long as it does not involve the worship of idols, must not be harmed.

January 27, 2021 – The Washington, D.C. based think tank [CSIS](#) hosts an ARCH [panel](#) to discuss how the preservation of Afghanistan’s cultural heritage can support peace. The panel consists of former UNESCO Director Irina Bokova, who is now an ARCH board member, along with UN Ambassador Adela Raz and Luis Monreal, General Manager of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture.

February 20, 2021 – In a great breakthrough, the Taliban releases an official [statement](#) on the importance of valuing ancient artifacts and historic sites and directly instructs its field commanders to protect such sites and to prevent looting.

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- **ARCH International on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#)**
 - **For Press Inquiries** – Contact Dr. Cheryl Benard, cbenard@archinternational.org or Sophia Schultz sschultz@archinternational.org
 - **More [information](#) about the initiative**
 - ARCH first raised the issue in July 2019 in an [article](#) in DefenseOne
 - [Blog Post](#) for ARCH in support of our petition by concerned Kabul-based student Nasratullah Hewadwall
 - Check out our immersive and educational [StoryMaps](#)