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Da Shahidano Chawk: Martyrs' Square in Kandahar City, Afghanistan

A Thesis Presented

by

**William E. Donovan**

to

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Abstract of the Thesis

Da Shahidano Chawk: Martyrs' Square in Kandahar City, Afghanistan by

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The *Shahidano Chawk* is a monument in the center of Kandahar City, Afghanistan. It was constructed after World War II, in the period between 1946 and 1948. This thesis explores the various meanings the monument has embodied since its creation. It was originally an ethno-nationalist monument which used two highly charged events, the 1843 massacre at the Herat gate, and the 1880 battle of Maiwand, as motivational motifs to help cement the Pashtun people at a time of crisis. The crisis was the formation of Pakistan, and the transition of the Durand Line from a line demarcating a sphere of influence into a hard international boundary. Later, the martyr motif created a powerful connection with the Afghan and Arab Mujahedeen who fought together against the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989. The September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States led to me being deployed to Kandahar where my military unit used an image of the monument on a medal known as a battalion coin. The *Shahidano Chawk* does not have a fixed meaning, but rather it has been appropriated as an important public expression of values by many groups who attempted to control narratives about their identity and the region by claiming this monument in the bustling center of Kandahar City.

## **Dedication Page**

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to Laurie, my wife, who has been there for me through thick and thin.

## Frontispiece

“Do not say that those who are killed in God’s cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it.”

The Qur'an 2:154.

“For to me to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.

But if I live in the flesh, this *is* the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not.

For I am in a strait betwixt the two, have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better:

Nevertheless to abide in the flesh *is* more needful for you.”

The Bible, The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians 1:21-24.

“[Some] said, ‘Construct a building over them: their Lord knows best about them.’ Those who prevailed said, ‘We shall build a place of worship over them.’

The Qur'an 18:21.

“If you are not martyred at Maiwand,

May God keep you alive to taste your cowardice.”

Traditional Pashtun Two Line Landay Poem. Robert Sampson, “Guns and Roses: The Two Strands of Love and War in Pashto Poetry,” in *Images of Afghanistan: Exploring Culture Through Art and Literature*, ed. Arley Loewen and Josette McMichael et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 122.

## Acknowledgments

Sayed Habibullah Amen was a translator for the U.S. State Department during my deployment as a soldier to Kandahar, Afghanistan. Mr. Amen helped me connect loose strands, and gave me insight into where to look for more information during the early stages of writing this paper. The correspondence between Mr. Amen and I is in the appendix at the end of this paper.

I would also like to thank the Art History and Criticism faculty at Stony Brook University, in particular my thesis advisors Dr. Shoki Goodarzi and Dr. Michele H. Bogart for their guidance. Dr. Goodarzi was kind enough to allow me to be her teaching assistant for Islamic Art History, which allowed me to transform this thesis from a memoir into an academic document. Dr. Bogart's public art seminar made me consider monuments and memorials from a completely new perspective, and in the process made me aware of many assumptions I had previously not questioned regarding public art. In addition, I would like to extend a thank you to Dr. Joseph Monteyne, whose Early Modern seminar I attended for three semesters.

## Chapter 1



Figure 1 The Shahidano Chawk sits at the center of today's Kandahar City, but was built at the former western edge of the old city between 1946 and 1948.

The *Shahidano Chawk*, or Martyrs' Square, is a public monument in Kandahar City, Afghanistan. The monument was constructed between 1946 and 1948, during the rule of King Zahir Shah.<sup>1</sup> King Zahir Shah was a member of the ruling Pashtun tribe, the Durrani, who founded the modern city of Kandahar in the eighteenth century, and who are still a leading political entity today. The Pashtun occupy a region from north eastern Iran into and through Afghanistan, following the southern crescent of habitable land that wraps around the large central mountain range, and into western Pakistan's semi-autonomous frontier provinces known

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy Hatch Dupree, *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, (Kabul: Afghan Air Authority and Afghan Tourist Organization, 1977), 282. The entry in Dupree's tourism guide for the Shahidano Chawk is listed under sight-seeing: "(1) Da Shahidanu Chawk (Martyrs Square), A Monument to Pious Martyrs (Shahidan: those who died in battle) stands in the center of Kandahar's main square called Da Shahidanu Chawk. Flags and small cannons encircle this monument built between 1946 and 1948. All manner of wheeled and four-footed traffic revolves around this monument, including large canopied pushcarts stacked high with jingling bottles filled with brilliant, shimmering colored-sodawater. They are an especially appealing addition to the street scenes of Kandahar."



as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas or FATA. This entire area is referred to as Pashtunistan, or land of the Pashtun.<sup>2</sup> Although the Pashtun people are not the majority of the population in all parts of Afghanistan they have controlled the central government since its inception in the early twentieth century. All the Afghan political figures in the following text are Pashtun.

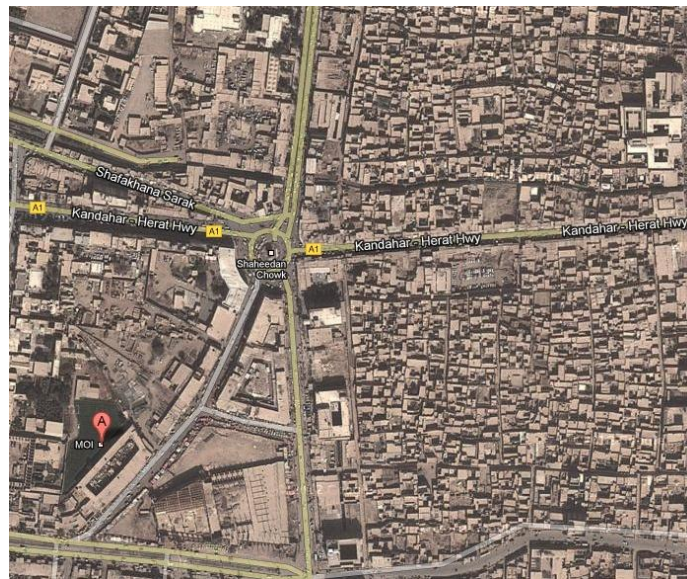


Figure 2 Aerial view, showing the location of the *Shahidano Chowk*, spelled Shaheedan Chowk in this image. Notice how the old city to the east of the monument has smaller, densely packed buildings, and the area to the west of the monument has larger, more sparsely arranged buildings. This is because there was a wall just to the east of the monument when it was constructed that contained the older 18<sup>th</sup> century city. The area to the west of the monument is newer construction.

To my non-native eyes the *Shahidano Chowk* stood indecipherably the way obelisks or cenotaphs have when I have seen those monuments. Without having done any research my intuition told me that the *Shahidano Chowk* was a symbolic public structure that both echoed something ancient and yet was still politically relevant today, this thesis bears that out. The *Shahidano Chowk* was created for one purpose, but its powerful links to regional history and

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<sup>2</sup> After the United States invaded Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001 attacks, King Zahir Shah, returned to Afghanistan in 2002 as a frail 69 year old. He refused the title of King. Zahir Shah was proclaimed Father of the Nation, and hosted the Loya Jirga. The Loya Jirga is an Afghan political gathering of regional leaders, equivalent to a senate or parliament. In 2002 it appointed Hamid Karzai as the leader of Afghanistan.

events have made most groups that have come to power in the region adopt the monument for the group's own purposes.

My research methodology began with the object, and a description of the monument and its locus in its immediate surroundings in Kandahar City. I worked from photographs, and from memory having seen the monument in person many times while serving as a soldier in Kandahar. The second step was to examine the motives surrounding the *Shahidano Chawk* having been built, which included historical research into Afghan and British conflicts, and contemporaneous geo-political events in the mid-1940s, focusing on the crisis in the Pashtun community surrounding the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the controversial international border between Afghanistan and Pakistan: the Durand line, which runs through a large section of Pashtunistan. One example of the way the monument was adopted can be found if we jump forward to the 1990s, there are brief acknowledgments of the distinction between two groups: the inwardly directed Pashtun Taliban and the internationalist jihadists Al Qaeda, and how the *Shahidano Chawk* was a public expression of values which united these two disparate groups largely because of their shared history fighting against the Soviet Union from 1979 to 1989. Finally, as a way to tie together the many perspectives it was necessary to synthesize while writing this thesis, it was incumbent upon me to unflinchingly explore how the *Shahidano Chawk* was represented on the US Army *Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Battalion Coin*, which I designed in 2005 while deployed as a soldier in Kandahar City, to critique this object I used recent research into moral psychology by Dr. Jonathan Haidt.



Figure 3 The Shahidano Chawk sits in the center of Kandahar City and a busy traffic circle. This photo is looking towards the north east.

This paper argues that the *Shahidano Chawk* is an ethno-nationalist Pashtun monument and a war memorial. It was mandated at a time when the Pashtun people of Afghanistan were forcibly divided by a line on a map and world events. There is a complex history surrounding Afghanistan in the nineteenth century, sometimes referred to as the “Great Game,” where the Afghans, British, and Russian governments all vied for influence and power over the region. This led to several overt and covert conflicts. The three main wars are called the Afghan-British wars, taking place in 1838, 1878, and 1919 respectively.<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the memorial aspects of the *Shahidano Chawk* would be seen as inspirational by the Taliban, a fundamentalist group which restored order within the Pashtun region of Afghanistan following a civil war in the 1990s. The Taliban was a regional movement whose aspirations did not include international terrorism. However, some of the values embodied in the *Shahidano Chawk*, namely self-sacrifice in the form of martyrdom in defense

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<sup>3</sup> For a good historical overview of the three Afghan-British wars read: Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).

against a western military power, were shared by the foreign Mujahedeen, or holy warriors, who had fought alongside many of the Taliban leaders in the 1980s against the Russians.

Unfortunately for the world, one of those Mujahedeen was the charismatic internationalist Osama bin Laden. The Taliban allowed Osama bin Laden to train Al Qaeda fighters just outside of Kandahar City under the protection of the Taliban's leader Mullah Omar. However, while the Taliban and Al Qaeda did share some values, their overall goals were different, and the two groups should not be conflated.

When in front of the *Shahidano Chawk*, its most striking feature, in a region plagued by sandstorms that threaten to choke the color out of the city, is its brilliant white and ultramarine tiling. The bright tiling causes the *Shahidano Chawk* to stand out against the more drab neighboring buildings and ever present mountains which ring Kandahar City with a monochromatic, but also dramatic, landscape. The ultramarine blue domed roof announces itself, standing as a beacon against vibrating heat and omnipresent clay.

A four-sided domed structure that is roughly 35 feet tall and 20 feet wide, the *Shahidano Chawk* has three arched portals on each side. The two inner arches of each wall are supported by blue pillars, for a total of eight pillars. Blue tiling edges the inside of the portals, and along the corners of the structure, and is accented by some areas of mosaic in a lighter shade of turquoise blue. The entire architectural form is distinctly symmetrical, which places emphasis on its geometric form which is then further emphasized by the rectangles and circles in the geometric landscaping maintained around its base, and ultimately the traffic circle in which it centrally sits.

Today the *Shahidano Chawk* is located at the busiest traffic circle near the center of Kandahar City. However, urban sprawl has obscured its original location. It was constructed at

the mid-point of the western wall of the old city in order to face Herat, a city near the Iranian border, and was known as the Herat gate, or in Pashto the Herat darwaza.

### **1919: Afghan Independence**



**Figure 4 Amir Amanullah, pictured above, declared Afghanistan “independent and free” in 1919.**

During the construction of the *Shahidano Chawk* Afghanistan was still a new nation, having achieved independence only twenty-seven years earlier, in 1919. In that year, following two wars with the British, the newly crowned Amir Amanullah sent news to the British Raj in India that Afghanistan was “independent and free.”<sup>4</sup> This declaration of freedom began the third and final Afghan British war. Simultaneously with this third Afghan British war, Mahatma Gandhi, since his 1915 return to India from South Africa, had been pressuring for Indian independence using non-violent civil disobedience. Under these multiple forms of pressure the

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 87.

British agreed to negotiations with Amir Amanullah, during these talks the new Afghan state was established.<sup>5</sup>

While under the leadership of Amir Amanullah Afghanistan underwent a period of social reform, which that lasted until his abdication in 1929. During the time after Amir Amanullah left office the new nation saw three separate rulers in four years. King Zahir Shah was crowned in 1933, and ushered in a period of major public works construction including the *Shahidano Chawk*.<sup>6</sup> Because he assumed the rule at eighteen, initially his paternal uncles ran the government. Photographs of King Zahir Shah's life are evidence of tremendous change he lived through (figs. 5, 6, and 7). We can see the transition from a young man wearing a military uniform to a head of state meeting President Kennedy in Washington D.C., and finally he was appointed to ceremonial role of "Father of the Nation" in 2002 following the invasion of US led forces.

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<sup>5</sup> Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 90. Ewans quotes a British government memo: On October 2, 1919, Lord Chelmsford wrote from Delhi, India to London, England that: "We have to deal with an Afghan nation, impregnated with the world-spirit of self-determination and national freedom, inordinately self-confident in its new-found emancipation from autocracy and in its supposed escape from all menace from Russia, impatient of any restraint on its absolute independence. To expect the Afghanistan of today willingly to accept a Treaty re-embodiment of our old control over her foreign policy is a manifest impossibility. If we were to impose it at the point of the sword, to what end? The Treaty would have been torn to shreds the moment the point of the sword was withdrawn."

<sup>6</sup> Abdul Hai Habibi, *Afghanistan: An Abridged History*, (Arizona: Fenestra Books, 2003), 114-116.



Figure 5 King Zahir Shah as a young man in the 1930s posed in a similar setting to Iranian Qajar dynasty photos from the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.



Figure 6 President Kennedy and King Zahir Shah met at the White House in Washington D.C. in 1963. King Zahir Shah (in front of the microphones) addressed the crowd, followed by an interpreter who read his remarks in English, saying "Certain common principles have formed a bond of friendship between our two nations: our love of liberty and our belief in the inherent dignity of man have effectively bridged the wide gap created by oceans and continents."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Accessed on 9/7/2012: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIEwPZ6cAO4> The above quote is a transcription of this video from 5:47 to 6:01.



Figure 7 Seated at the table are, on the left, Hamid Karzai, the president of Afghanistan, and, on the right, (King) Zahir Shah, the Father of the Nation, following the United States invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

### **1940s: Pakistan is Born, Crisis on the Border, and Rising Nationalism in Afghanistan**

The 1940s were a complicated time in Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region. Following the end of World War II the regional powers who had struggled with the British and Soviet Empires faced a period of time when there was a power vacuum. During this same period Afghanistan's neighboring country, British India, collapsed under internal and external pressure. British India was partitioned into two new states in 1947: the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Republic of India. This was a period of political turmoil and anxiety among the Pashtun people, who had now become divided between Afghanistan and British India by an imaginary border, the Durand Line, a border which was not renegotiated between the newly created Islamic Republic of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Durand Line, which under the British Raj had unclear legal properties, now functioned as an international border (fig. 8). According to Afghan



historian Khushal Habibi, the Durand Line “...split the Pashtoon nation in two.”<sup>8</sup> The Durand Line is still not recognized by the Afghan government.<sup>9</sup>

Bijan Omrani characterizes the controversy surrounding the Durand Line this way: “...there is, perhaps, one frontier dispute that trumps all the rest in terms of the world’s security concerns. That is the Durand Line, the notorious frontier between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Some people blame this frontier for all of Afghanistan’s current problems.”<sup>10</sup>

The political climate immediately following the time period when the *Shahidano Chawk* was constructed illustrates the tension between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Bijan Omrani writes about the relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan in 1948 and 1949:

*“We tend to forget the amount of bad feeling there has been between Pakistan and Afghanistan on account of the border. In 1948 Afghanistan voted against Pakistan joining the United Nations. Pakistan delayed Afghan import and export goods on the border. Afghan radio called for independence for Pashtunistan. In 1949 Pakistan inadvertently attacked Afghanistan territory by air, a skirmish followed. Shortly afterwards a loya jirga, a great council in Kabul, repudiated all the boundary treaties made with the British, gave support to the idea of an independent Pashtunistan and urged that all the people in those areas should be given a referendum and the right to vote to join Afghanistan.”<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> Abdul Hai Habibi, *Afghanistan: An Abridged History*, (Arizona: Fenestra Books, 2003), 111.

<sup>9</sup> Bijan Omrani, “The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border,” *Asian Affairs (London)* Vol. 40, issue 2 (2009): 177-195. Omrani writes about the Afghan viewpoint regarding the Durand Line that: “Afghanistan does not recognize the Durand Line as a legal international boundary. The Afghans claim agreement to the Line was obtained under duress.” Omrani summarizes the Pakistani viewpoint as: “Pakistan, of course, holds an entirely opposite viewpoint, arguing that the frontier, the Durand Line, is a legitimate international boundary, in 1893 and confirmed by later treaties in 1905, 1919, 1921, and 1930. Pakistanis hold themselves to be the inheritors of the British legal rights at the moment of independence.”

<sup>10</sup> Bijan Omrani, “The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border,” *Asian Affairs (London)* Vol. 40, issue 2 (2009): 177-195.

<sup>11</sup> Bijan Omrani, “The Durand Line: History and Problems of the Afghan-Pakistan Border,” *Asian Affairs (London)* Vol. 40, issue 2 (2009): 177-195.



Figure 8 Kandahar City is labeled with "A" and the Durand Line, which divides Afghanistan and Pakistan, is the white line moving from the bottom left to the top right of the Google maps satellite photo. The highways on the Afghan side are marked in yellow, and in blue on the Pakistan side.

This brief overview presents historical context regarding international events and the border problem with Pakistan, and that context increased nationalist feelings inside Afghanistan. It was during this time that the *Shahidano Chawk* was constructed, and as its name suggests it invoked martyrdom precisely at a time of high ethno-nationalist feelings.<sup>12</sup> Martyrdom is often

<sup>12</sup> Modern nationalist movements appear to the dispassionate observer as reactions against either modernity or empire, or both. That reaction is often a passionate one and brings to mind words like soil, blood, and family. The rhetoric employed by nationalist leaders often uses the motif of martyrdom. Martyrdom can find expression in the arts through political writing and poetry. While this thesis focuses on Afghanistan these feelings are not particularly Afghan. The Italian nationalist Giuseppe Mazzini, who led a group of radicals known as the “Young Italians” in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote that “Ideas grow quickly when watered with the blood of martyrs.” Like his Pashtun counterparts, the Irish nationalist poet W.B. Yeats also drew his inspiration from the British Empire, and in 1920 wrote a poem about two posthumous Irishmen, named Pearse and Connolly, who had been killed in an uprising on Easter in 1916. Pearse and Connolly were seen as martyrs by Irish nationalists. In the poem they describe the way to revive their rose tree, the tree being an allegory for Ireland:

‘But where can we draw water,’  
 Said Pearse to Connolly,  
 ‘When all the wells are parched away?  
 O plain as plain can be  
 There’s nothing but our own red blood  
 Can make a right Rose Tree.’

manifested as particularly public display of selfless devotion to a cause, and as such, representations of it are instantly understood as powerful narrative devices in nationalist identity politics.

The historian Erika Doss has explored the issues inherent in public monuments and memorials, and more specifically the way these public art forms express memory and history. Doss provides a definition of public memorials as places which highlight “issues of memory and history and an urgent desire to express and claim those issues in visibly public contexts,” representing efforts to, “control particular narratives about the nation and its publics,” rooted in, “persistent demands for representation and respect.”<sup>13</sup> As a political motif, martyrdom is a tool for urging self-sacrifice and loyalty to nationalist causes which lends itself well to public expression in monuments. One familiar example for Americans are the lists of service members who have been killed in action in American wars. These lists, known as honor rolls, are in town squares throughout the country.<sup>14</sup>

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Sources for this footnote: The Mazzini quotation: Charles Downer Hazen, *Fifty Years of Europe: 1870-1919*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919), 4.

The Yeats poem: William Butler Yeats, “The Rose Tree,” in *Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (Simon & Schuster, Inc., Kindle Edition), 183. According to the National Library of Ireland’s website The Rose Tree was first published in 1920. <http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html> accessed 9/7/2012.

<sup>13</sup> Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>14</sup> The honor role in my home town, North Adams, Massachusetts was on the edge of our downtown, and I remember as a little boy asking my father what it was, and told me it was the names of men who died in battle.



**Figure 9, On March 9, 1843 Afghan forces attacked the walls of the Herat gate after dark. The British "poured methodical fire into the attackers," resulting in six hundred dead on the Afghan side.**

Valerie Rosoux, in her essay “The Politics of Martyrdom,” writes that the important thing for those interested in using martyrdom as a political tool is: “the *representation* of those who commemorate martyrdom.”<sup>15</sup> The Pashtun nationalists living in Kandahar City in the 1940s did not have to look far for historical examples of martyrdom capable of igniting political passion through monumental representation. Two specific martyrdom narratives took the monumental form embodied by the *Shahidano Chawk*. Firstly a tragedy, the March 9, 1843 massacre of six hundred Afghan warriors by the British as the Afghans stormed Kandahar’s Herat gate (fig. 9).<sup>16</sup> Secondly was the great victory, on July 27, 1880 at the battle of Maiwand. The Afghan army came from the west and routed the British army. The Afghans decimated the British, killing around one-thousand-and-three-hundred out of two-thousand-eight-hundred of the British and their camp followers.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Valerie Rosoux, “The Politics of Martyrdom,” in *Martyrdom: The Psychology, Theology, and Politics of Self-Sacrifice*, ed. Rona M. Fields et al. (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2004), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Tanner, *Afghanistan: A Military History from Alexander the Great to the War Against the Taliban, Revised Edition*, (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2009), 192.

<sup>17</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 410-411.

## 1880: The Battle of Maiwand



**Figure 10 Ayub Khan, the Afghan commander who routed the British Army in the battle of Maiwand.**

On July 27, 1880 the British Army was defeated by Ayub Khan's forces along a series of ridges to west of Kandahar City. This battle bears the significance of being the first major head-to-head battle lost by the British Army in Central Asia. Ayub Khan was a commander from the city of Herat.<sup>18</sup> Herat is located to the west of Kandahar, near to Afghanistan's modern border with Iran.

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<sup>18</sup> Herat is notable for the role the city has played in Art History. In particular, over the course of the last millennium, its architecture and Persian miniature painting have made it an important cultural center on the eastern edge of Persian empires.



Figure 11 Maiwand is labeled “A,” and Kandahar City is labeled “B” on this map. The distance is approximately 41 miles. The bottom right of the map crosses the Durand Line in to Pakistan.

Field Marshall Lord Roberts, the British commander who relieved the defeated British forces after they had retreated into a fortified Kandahar City, entitled a section of his memoirs the “Maiwand Disaster,” and wrote: “Our troops were completely routed, and had to thank the apathy of the Afghans in not following them up for escaping total annihilation.”<sup>19</sup> When the same events are recounted from an Afghan perspective the emphasis shifts towards the Afghan heroes and their resistance to the British Empire. The Afghan historian and Professor at Kabul University, Abdul Hai Habibi, characterized the same battle as: “A fierce battle ensued until the freedom fighters were victorious.”<sup>20</sup> These two irreconcilable worldviews, which in this case explain the same event, represent polar views of recent history, this is an example of the larger clash of worldviews that can define the difference between the way the West and Afghanistan understand the history of their interaction. This cognitive dissonance of two opposed viewpoints foreshadows my experience as an American soldier stationed in Kandahar, now an art historian, trying to make sense of the *Shahidano Chawk*. The *Shahidano Chawk* is simultaneously a monument to martyrs and a military victory, and its meaning can shift into new constellations

<sup>19</sup> Field Marshall Lord Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India Vol II*, (London: Richard Bentley and Son, Publisher in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen, 1897), 334.

<sup>20</sup> Abdul Hai Habibi, *Afghanistan: An Abridged History*, (Arizona: Fenestra Books, 2003), 108.

depending on which version of events is being represented, and equally important is who means to control the image of the monument.

However that event is described by historians, the battle of Maiwand is a source of pride for Pashtuns, and has entered into Pashtun poetry. One example is in the frontispiece at the beginning of this paper and here is another. Both poems reference martyrdom:

*Young love, if you do not fall in the battle of Maiwand,  
By God, someone is saving you as a token of shame.<sup>21</sup>*

The *Shahidano Chawk* was placed alongside the Herat Gate intentionally as a way to memorialize Ayub Khan's having arrived from the western Afghan city of Herat to defend Kandahar against the British. The Herat gate was also the site of the 1843 massacre of hundreds of Afghan warriors. The location of the *Shahidano Chawk* references both events, and is a reminder to Kandaharis of both tragedy and victory. However, while the events referenced by the *Shahidano Chawk* took place in relatively recent memory, the *Shahidano Chawk* also references an ancient architectural form. The four-sided domed monument known as a charhartaq traces its origins back into pre-Islamic Afghanistan.

### **Antiquity and Medieval Architecture: The Charhartaq**

Although the dome is ubiquitous in Islamic architecture, the free standing four-sided domed building with arched doorways does have its own distinct history. According to the archaeologist Warwick Ball the concepts of a Muslim place of veneration and a commercial intersection are linked by the architectural form known as a charhartaq:

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<sup>21</sup> Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 411. This two line Landay poem is attributed to the Pashtun hero in Malalai.

*The most persistent pre-Islamic architectural structure forms to continue were, naturally enough the native Iranian ones of Central Asia. Chief of these is the charhartaq, or four-way domed arch, one of the most essential building blocks of Iranian architecture as a whole. The charhartaq was the focal point of Zoroastrian fire-temples, occurring either as an isolated building in its own right or as a part of a larger complex, forming a canopy for the sacred fire, but it occurred in secular architecture too. Its transition into Islamic architecture was entirely smooth... The charhartaq is used as Muslim tombs for special figures of veneration... The form also appears in secular architecture, most notably as a dome forming the intersection of two bazaar streets, or the charsu.*<sup>22</sup>

The *Shahidano Chawk* fulfills both historical roles Ball assign to the charhartaq. It is located in the center of an urban downtown market and is a place of veneration, although the site does not reference Zoroastrian religion, but rather later regional mausoleums.

Today the *Shahidano Chawk* is located in the commercial center of Kandahar City. It is surrounded by a commercial market providing the needs of both modern and traditional households, where you can purchase modern commodities imported from around the world alongside regionally produced objects and food products. Despite its modern surroundings the *Shahidano Chawk* is an ancient form, and can be found in ancient Persian Sassanian ruins.

The pre-Islamic Zoroastrian religion of Persia holds fire as central, sacred phenomena. It is believed that their fire temples were open on all four sides, like the *Shahidano Chawk*, in order to make the fire visible from every direction. Today, we know about these early temples mostly through archaeological excavations and the reverse imagery on Sassanian coinage. The Smithsonian has a photographic record of one standing Zoroastrian fire temple (fig. 12). In this image we see a structure made from earth that had four arched portals, the vaulted room inside

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<sup>22</sup> Warwick Ball, *The Monuments of Afghanistan: History, Archaeology and Architecture*, (London: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2008), 118-119. Some of Ball's ideas were confirmed by Sayed Habibullah Amen: "Architects were brought from Iran at the time of Ahmed Shah Baba in late 17<sup>th</sup> century. He provided houses for them and they remained in Kandahar. Shaheedano chaok has a very simple design and initially it doesn't represent any country... The word "Char" or "Chahar" means four in Farsi or Dari. Chahartaq means something with four pillars, shelves or walls." Email from Sayed Habibullah Amen to Author, in appendix.



the temple would have housed a fire, and worshippers would have been able to see the fire from all directions because of the open walls.



Figure 12 Photograph of a Zoroastrian fire temple taken in Iran, and one of the oldest forms of the chahartaq is stored in the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery of Art.<sup>23</sup>

The fire temple (fig 13) in the Sassanian Empire was transferred onto the imagery of minted coins. These coins, combined with the archaeological record, show that the architectural form of the charhartaq dates well back into antiquity. On the reverse of the coin we can see two attendants on either side of the altar which houses the sacred fire. These coins are important to archaeologists, because they allow the dating of particular practices.

The Sassanian world was enveloped by Arab armies between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, which introduced Islam to the region, after this period this building type spread to become the norm in neighboring regions. The Fire Temple lost its original religious significance, but took on new meaning in various contexts, eventually including its use as a mausoleum.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.asia.si.edu/explore/ancient-world/shapur-plate/cities.asp> accessed on 9/7/2012.



Figure 13 Drachm of Shapur I, who ruled from 242 to 270 CE, has a reverse (right image) depicting a fire altar with two attendants on either side.

The tenth century *Tomb of the Samanids* in Bukhara, Uzbekistan is one of the finest examples of a charhartaq used as a mausoleum (fig. 14).<sup>24</sup> It was built by a dynasty local to the region, the Samanids. Its form anticipates the four-sided domed arch used to create the *Shahidano Chawk*. In addition, both monuments commemorate the lives of human beings in death, which is sometimes viewed as a taboo among some Islamic groups, although it is not forbidden in the Qur'an.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The *Tomb of the Samanids* is about a four hour drive from Kabul, the seat of the national government in Afghanistan.

<sup>25</sup> For an instance where a mausoleum would not have been tolerated we can look to Osama bin Laden. Osama bin Laden was a Sunni Salafist. According to his biographer, Michael Scheuer, and referencing Osama bin Laden being buried at sea: "Bin Laden was a Sunni Salafist, an Islamic sect which hews to the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate successors. One of these traditions is strict opposition to such things as saints, shrines, and other means of glorifying man in ways that should be reserved for God. In other words, had anyone built a shrine to him bin Laden's own followers would have been the first to tear it down." From Michael Scheuer, *Osama Bin Laden*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ix.

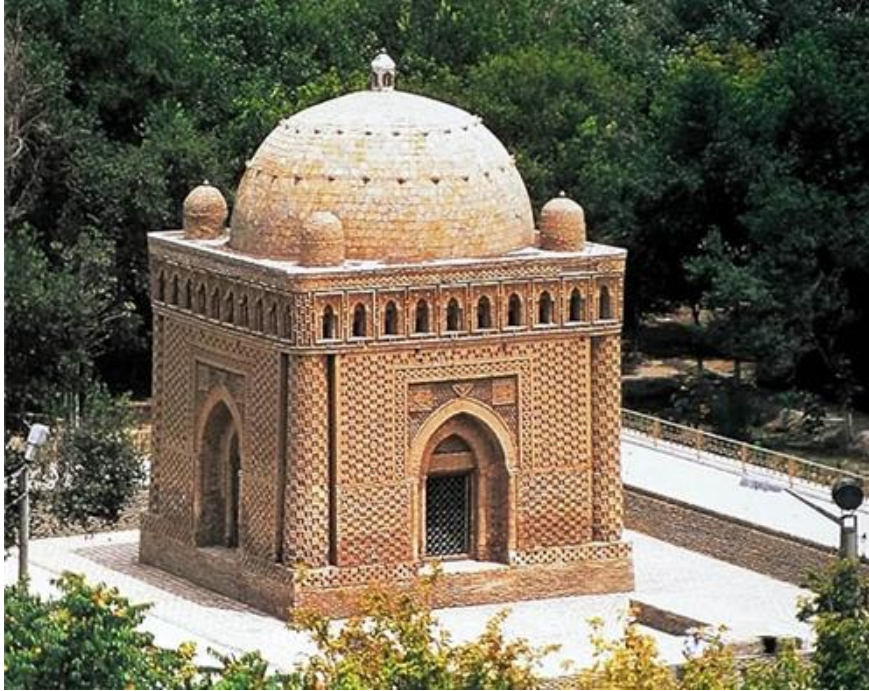


Figure 14 The *Tomb of the Samanids* in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. The mausoleum was constructed during the 10th century by Samanid dynasty.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries influence from the Mughal Empire would cover both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup> Unlike some Islamic dynasties the Mughal caliphs were not adverse to mausoleums. The Mughal ruler Shajahan (r. 1628-58) built the world's most famous tomb, the *Taj Mahal*, which was completed in 1647.<sup>27</sup> Between the geographical locations of the Samanid and Mughal dynasties lies Afghanistan, it makes sense that the *Shahidano Chawk* would reference a form that had associations relating to funerary monuments and a glorious historical past to these two powerful and artistically impressive dynasties.

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<sup>26</sup> Yolande Crowe, "Central Asia and Afghanistan," in *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, ed. George Michell et al. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1978), 259-260.

<sup>27</sup> Sheila S. Blair and Johnathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250 – 1800*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 279 - 281.

## The U.S. Army and the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team Battalion Coin

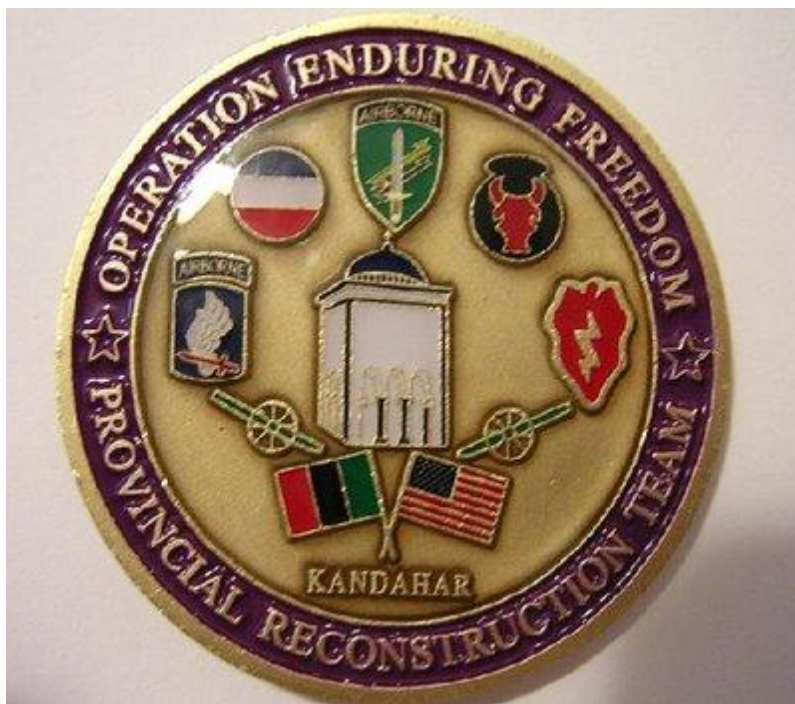


Figure 15 Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team Battalion Coin. Reverse side. I designed the coin without knowing the history behind the monument. Brass and enamel, 2" diameter.

I am ending this paper where it began for me. I served as an infantryman in the United States Army's 168<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Afghanistan from May 2004 to May 2005.<sup>28</sup> My unit, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon of Charlie Company of Task Force 168, was based within Kandahar City about three miles from the *Shahidano Chawk*.<sup>29</sup> Our base was known as the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team or the "Kandahar PRT." PRTs are secure military bases, and they are located throughout Afghanistan. The Kandahar PRT was a walled compound inside an old fruit factory that still had a small grove of pomegranate trees.

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<sup>28</sup> I was awarded the following U.S. Army medals: Army Achievement Medal, Global War on Terrorism Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, National Defense Service Medal, Armed Forces Reserve Medal with Meritorious Device, Combat Infantrymans Badge, and Driver and Mechanic Badge with Bar.

<sup>29</sup> My military occupational specialty was 11 Bravo, or infantryman. I was my four man team's SAW gunner. SAW is an anagram for Squad Automatic Weapon. The one distinction about my job that is important to this paper is that I rode in the turret area of the vehicle, and had a bird's eye view of the city as we drove through it.

In 2005, I was approached by an officer from Civilian Affairs with an art project.<sup>30</sup> The officer had heard from the other soldiers that I was an artist.<sup>31</sup> He ordered me to design the battalion coin for the Kandahar PRT, and dictated exactly what would be on it.

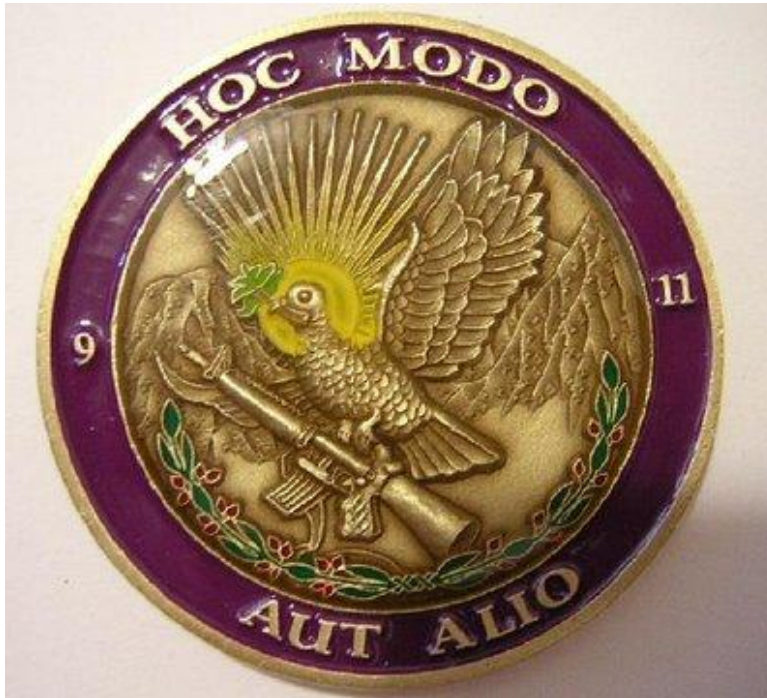


Figure 16 Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team Battalion Coin. Obverse side. Brass and enamel, 2" diameter.

The obverse (fig. 17) would contain an image of a dove holding an M-16 assault rifle and an olive branch while flying in front of a landscape that looked like the mountainous outcroppings surrounding Kandahar City, along with a rising sun and a laurel wreath. Around its perimeter, the officer indicated, it would have the date 9/11 and the Latin inscription Hoc Modo Aut Alio. The Latin translates roughly as: One way or the other. The officer's intended meaning with the double imagery of the dove and the M16, and the ambivalent Latin saying, was that we

<sup>30</sup> Civilian Affairs is the branch of the Special Forces Command which is most responsible for the mission to "build hearts and minds." It is a branch of the U.S. Army's Special Forces whose mission is both humanitarian and political.

<sup>31</sup> At the time I was one semester from matriculating with a Master in Fine Arts degree in Painting from the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

would accomplish the mission of rebuilding Afghanistan, and making it a Democratic nation, through either peace or force.

The reverse (fig. 16) of the coin would contain the *Shahidano Chawk* surrounded by the symbols of the various U.S. military units in Kandahar Province at that time. It would also have the flags of Afghanistan and the United States crossing over each other above the word Kandahar, two 19<sup>th</sup> century cannons with spoked wheels and green barrels to either side of the base of the *Shahidano Chawk*, and around the perimeter it was to read: Operation Enduring Freedom, Provincial Reconstruction Team.

I diligently designed the coin.

Seven years have passed, and now I can see the ruthless pragmatism that the coin embodies as something outside of myself. The schizophrenic message it contains towards the Afghans is disturbing and paradoxical: there is one goal, your welfare, which we will achieve by any means including your destruction.

The moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt has conducted research into moral reasoning using the scientific method, and his conclusion regarding moral reasoning is that it is largely a post-hoc construction:

*Moral intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously, long before moral reasoning has a chance to get started, and those first intuitions tend to drive our later reasoning. If you think that moral reasoning is something we do to figure out the truth, you'll be constantly frustrated by how foolish, biased, and illogical people become when they disagree with you. But if you think about moral reasoning as a skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas— to justify our own actions and to defend the teams we belong to— then things will make a lot more sense. Keep your eye on the intuitions, and don't*

*take people's moral arguments at face value. They're mostly post hoc constructions made up on the fly, crafted to advance one or more strategic objectives.*<sup>32</sup>

The one object I have that most reminds me of Kandahar City, the Battalion coin I designed, has an image of the *Shahidano Chawk*, a monument my enemy in the war saw as an important public expression of their values. The monument has wormed its way indelibly into my worldview and made me look deeper into my own actions and motivations, and made me try to do the same for the Afghans.

### **Conclusion**

The *Shahidano Chawk* is a monument in the center of Kandahar City, Afghanistan. It was constructed after World War II, in the period between 1946 and 1948. It was originally an ethno-nationalist monument which used the representation of two highly charged events, the 1843 massacre at the Herat gate, and the 1880 battle of Maiwand, as motivational motifs to help cement the Pashtun people at a time of crisis. The crisis was the formation of Pakistan, and the transition of the Durand Line from a line demarcating a sphere of influence into a hard international boundary. Later, the martyr motif created a powerful connection with the Afghan and Arab Mujahedeen who fought together against the Soviet invasion from 1979 to 1989. One of the founders of the Taliban, Abdul Salam Zaeef, referred to the monument as an important way for to him to remember “all my friends who were martyred.”<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately the bond formed between these two groups, who fought and died side by side, later led to the Taliban sheltering Osama bin Laden as he trained Al Qaeda terrorists. The September 11, 2001 attacks

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<sup>32</sup> Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, (Random House, Inc. Kindle Edition, 2012), Kindle Locations 102-106.

<sup>33</sup> Abdul Salam Zaeef, *My Life with the Taliban*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 52.

in the United States led to me being deployed to Kandahar where my military unit used the image of the *Shahidano Chawk* on a Battalion coin in a pragmatic and ruthless representation of our mission at the Kandahar Provincial Reconstruction Team. The *Shahidano Chawk* does not have a fixed meaning, but rather it has been appropriated as an important image by many groups from the Pashtun nationalists in 1946 to the Taliban in the 1990s to the US Army in 2004 and 2005. All these groups tried to control narratives about their identity and the region through their claiming of this very visible public monument in the center of Kandahar City.



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## Appendix

Email from Sayed Habibullah Amen to Author on March 27, 2011.

Sorry for delay, I was looking different books if I can find some thing specific about the shahidano chawk.

The word shahidan means: Martyrs -

The word Chawk means : Intersection or a traffic circle.

When Ahmed shah Baba builds his city in late 1700. He makes 4 main doors for the city. The Door which is called Shahedano Chawk used to known as Herat Darwaza or Herat gate. Since this door or gate was a way to herat province.

Shahidano Chawk was build at the time of King Zaher shah in the memory of those martyrs who fought British and got killed. This fighting had a connection with Maiwand fight. This was the second fight between afghans and british.

I could not confirm the story but this is how some people described it. A bunch of afghan fighters attacked the British base in Kandahar city. They were probably 4 or 10. They killed a lot of British forces and finally got killed. Most people I talked to they said, This indecent took place during the night. I couldn't confirm If this gorilla attack took place before the defeat of British in Maiwand or after that.

Maiwand is a district bordering Kandahar and Helmand. A deadly fighting took place in that district between British and Afghan forces. Afghans defeated British in Maiwand which was the

first line. Later on when new forces backed up the British, they defeats the Afghans.

Email to Author on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

**Do you remember what the words on the structure say? It would be very helpful to know what the inscriptions say.**

*Answer : The words are verses from Holy Quran.*

**Does the color combination of blue and white mean anything, or does it just look good?**

*Answer : The colors are only for better looking. However, The dark blue represents the color of Lapis Lazuli that Afghanistan has.*

**Was the Shahidano Chawk placed on the old location of the Herat Gate, because Ayub Khan came from Herat with his Army for the Battle of Maiwand?**

*Answer : The city, which is know as Qala fasil had 1 to 2 meter of wideness on its top. It had very tall walls which was torn down 60 or 80 years ago. Qala fasil had 4 main doors. Shahidano chaok is located just out side the Herat darwaza. Ayob khan came from Herat province, on the way comming to kandahar other groups joined him for fighting.*

**Would you say that the Shahidano Chawk is more of a memorial to the men who died in battle, or a monument to Ayub Khan's victory at Maiwand?**

*Answer : Shahedano chaok is only known for the people who were died in this place.*

*In the Maiwand battle something significant happened that British writers don't have it in their book. There is a place that afghan fighters are tired and they are losing the battle. and they want*

*to leave their positions for British troops. In this moment a lady by the name of Malalai stepped forward and held the flag of battle and recited this poem. " If you don't die in the battle of Maiwand - you will remain as a coward for ever". After listening to this poem Afghan troops got energetic, torn down the wall which were stopping them and won the battle. Her age disputed, she was either around 14 or 17. She was providing water for fighters. In our history she is known as a hero.*

**Could the Shahidano Chawk be compared to the mausoleum of Ahmad Shah Durrani, or to the mausoleum of Mir Wais?**

*Answer: Shahidano chawk has its own history. It represent the resistance of people against British. People don't compare them with one another. They all have their own values.*

**I picked up the book by Abdul Hai Habibi, Afghanistan: An Abridged History, and it has a bunch of great information. I was reading another book, The Monuments of Afghanistan, by Warwick Ball; and Professor Habibi put emphasis on architectural forms like the Shahidano Chawk having roots in India, while Ball put emphasis on Iran. Basically they were both talking about 4 sided structures with arched portals and domed roofs, but they contradict each other. Ball called it a "chahartaq," and Prof. Habibi called it a "shirwanian." Have you heard anything about this?**

*Answer: Architects were broght from iran at the time of Ahmed shah baba in late 17 century. he provided houses for them and they remained in Kandahar. Shaheedano chaok has a very simple design and initially it doesn't represent any country. Monuments of Ahmed shah baba and Mirwais Nikah have Iirani and Indian styles blended.*

*The word "Char" or "Chahar" means four in Farsi or Dari. Chahartaq means some thing with four pillars, shelves or walls. The word "Shirwanian" is an Indian word. Probably a kind of style. Sometimes, Pashto language has 2 words for 1 thing. It is because 3 languages have influenced this language.*

**Another archaeologist, Louis Dupree, who works at Kabul University, says that the Shahidano Chawk was built between 1943 and 1946. So that is the time of King Zahir, like you mentioned.**

*Answer: Dupree has done a lot of excavations in a lot of part of Afghanistan. She was hired to unburied the historical master pieces from different parts of the country. So, they could remain safe from thieves.*