



# AFGHAN WITNESS

A project by



CENTRE for  
INFORMATION  
RESILIENCE

## ESCALATIONS IN HERAT

Underlying Reasons for Tensions in the Region

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## Underlying Reasons for Tensions in the Region

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## 1. KEY EVENTS

- On 6 June 2026, the DoPVPV in Herat arrested numerous women over alleged hijab or dress code violations, triggering protests, security deployments, and widespread reporting across Afghan and diaspora media.
- Taliban messaging evolved over the reporting period, moving from initial denials of arrests to partial acknowledgements of detentions, and ultimately to confirmation by the provincial governor that a hijab enforcement campaign was underway.
- The enforcement actions were followed by protests in Herat, which were dispersed by Taliban forces, with reports of force used and increased security presence across the city and surrounding areas.

- The information environment around the events was highly contested, with verified reporting circulating alongside AI-generated and manipulated content that amplified and distorted accounts of the arrests and violence.
  - Multiple armed opposition groups issued statements or claimed attacks against DoPVPV personnel in response to the events, reflecting parallel mobilisation alongside local civil unrest.
  - Herat's role as a large border city with strong cross-border ties to Iran, significant Shi'a communities, and a historical record of resistance may explain why enforcement actions, particularly in Shi'a majority areas, were perceived as existential and sectarian, rather than routine policing.
  - The June 2026 sequence in Herat illustrated how moral policing campaigns, when layered with existing sectarian anxieties, militarisation, and resistance activity, can act as a tipping point.
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## 2. INTRODUCTION

On 6 June 2026, officials from the Herat Directorate for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (DoPVPV) arrested numerous women in Herat city over alleged hijab or dress code violations. The arrests formed part of a wider pattern of recurring enforcement campaigns in the province, which has become one of the most restrictive provincial capitals for women in Afghanistan.

These developments triggered local reporting, public concern, and competing narratives regarding the scale and nature of enforcement actions, alongside broader claims of protest activity and security responses in the city. They also coincided with a period of heightened international attention on Afghanistan, including discussions at UN level and ongoing diplomatic engagement between Taliban representatives and international actors.

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## 3. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT: WHY HERAT IS VULNERABLE TO TENSIONS

Herat is Afghanistan's [second](#) most [populated](#) provincial capital and has long been one of the country's principal [cultural](#), educational, and commercial centres. Historically known for its poets, artists, and philosophers, the city remains home to [numerous](#) universities and higher education institutions.

Located along the border with Iran, Herat has served as a crossroads for trade, migration, and [cultural](#) exchange for centuries. Its predominantly Persian-

speaking population, strong urban identity, and close social and economic ties with Iran distinguish it from many other provinces in Afghanistan.

Its economy is heavily dependent on cross-border trade and movement through the Islam Qala crossing, one of Afghanistan's main trade routes. Periodic disruptions linked to political tensions or mass [deportations](#) from Iran have reportedly affected local livelihoods, significantly reducing access to employment opportunities, healthcare, and cheaper imports.

### 3.1. PROVINCIAL LEADERSHIP

Herat is currently governed by Sheikh Mawlawi Ahmad Noor Islamjar, the only provincial governor among Afghanistan's 34 provinces who has not been reshuffled since the Taliban returned to power in August 2021. A native of Herat and an ethnic Tajik, Islamjar is a prominent Sunni religious scholar who has been associated with conservative social policies and [reportedly](#) holds anti-Shi'a views expressed in his Arabic-language book, '[Studies in Maturidi Doctrine](#)'.

The province's police chief, Sheikh Naqibullah Azizi, an ethnic Pashtun, was [appointed](#) in May 2026, replacing Haji Mohammad Yasir.

Herat was also home to [Sheikh Mujib Rahman Ansari](#), a pro-Taliban hardline cleric who [established](#) his own virtue and vice network during the former republic. Following his death in a 2022 [explosion](#), his brother, Sheikh Fazl Rahman Ansari, assumed a similar ideological role and has continued to [promote](#) comparable religious narratives.

### 3.2. EXISTING GRIEVANCES AND VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Herat province contains significant Shi'a and Hazara populations, particularly in [neighbourhoods](#) like Jibril. These communities have historically reported [discrimination](#), under-investment, and selective targeting during security operations.

In recent years, Shi'a communities in Herat province, have faced multiple pressures, including [Taliban-imposed restrictions](#) and deadly [attacks claimed](#) by the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Humanitarian assessments following earthquakes in western Afghanistan also recorded complaints that some Hazara-populated areas received inadequate assistance and that women faced [restricted](#) access to aid.

Women in Herat have additionally been subject to repeated restrictions linked to dress codes and mobility. Between [2025](#) and [2026](#), Afghan media outlets [reported](#) several cases involving women detained or prevented from accessing services due to alleged failures to comply with Taliban interpretations of appropriate dress,

including a female [surgeon](#) reportedly denied entry to Herat Regional Hospital for not wearing a burqa.

### 3.3. A HISTORY OF RESISTANCE AND CIVIC MOBILISATION

Herat has a long-standing history of armed opposition to central authorities and local power networks. In 1979, [Herat](#) was the site of a major uprising against Afghanistan's Soviet-backed government and later became a stronghold of mujahideen commander Ismail Khan.

During the Taliban's first period in power in the 1990s, the group faced resistance from sections of Herat's predominantly Persian-speaking population, which opposed the imposition of new political and social structures by a movement largely associated with Pashtun leadership.

The city has also developed a strong tradition of civic protest. Since the Taliban's return to power in 2021, Herat has repeatedly witnessed demonstrations, particularly those led by [women](#). In September 2021, women [protesting](#) Taliban restrictions were reportedly met with [gunfire](#), resulting in [casualties](#). Men have also [participated](#) in demonstrations to show their [discontent](#) with the Taliban de facto authorities.

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## 4. JUNE 2026: ARRESTS OF WOMEN IN HERAT

On 5 June, Afghan media outlets reported that the Taliban's Herat DoPVPV planned to arrest women who violated the hijab rule in the province. [Afghanistan International](#) and [Amu TV](#) cited a two-page document attributed to the DoPVPV, emphasising the obligation to wear the hijab and warning of arrests for non-compliance, alongside an [audio](#) recording attributed to the head of provincial coordination.

According to the message, the Herat provincial governor and the acting head of the DoPVPV had agreed to first disseminate the directive through Friday prayer leaders before beginning enforcement measures against alleged violators.

Between 6 and 7 June, [multiple Afghan media](#) outlets [reported](#) that DoPVPV ombudsmen arrested scores of women in Herat city for alleged hijab violations. The reports were accompanied by videos allegedly showing women being detained. A video shared by [Afghanistan International](#) showed only male enforcement officers, while footage shared by [Etilaatroz](#) showed an apparent female officer escorting a detained woman into a minivan used for transportation.

On 12 June, [Medecins Sans Frontieres](#) (MSF) disclosed that one of its staff members had been arrested on 6 June for alleged non-compliance with the dress code. According to MSF, the employee remained in custody for two days and was only

released under the condition of her husband, family members, and herself signing a “commitment to wear clothing in accordance with DoPVPV guidelines in the future.”



Figure 1: Screenshot of footage showing multiple Herat DoPVPV ombudsmen outside a shop. The men can be seen wearing the characteristic long white coat with a logo on the breast (blue). An alleged female officer (yellow) escorts a detained woman into a white van. (Source: [Etilaatroz](#))

#### 4.1. PROTESTS AND TALIBAN RESPONSE

The arrests prompted [demonstrations](#) from some local residents in the Jibril area of Herat. Protesters [gathered](#) to oppose the detentions, while Taliban security forces reportedly used [GRAPHIC] [force](#) to [disperse](#) crowds, reportedly beating demonstrators and [opening fire](#). There were also reports of casualties, and the protest was suppressed.

Following the [unrest](#), local and [international](#) media reported a rapid [militarisation](#) of Herat. On 12 June, [Afghanistan International](#) shared footage reportedly showing [convoys](#) of armed personnel and [armoured vehicles](#) deployed throughout the city. The mobilisation was reportedly intended to prevent further demonstrations.

On the same day, [Afghanistan International](#) also shared footage reportedly recorded in Kabul's Dasht-e Barchi neighbourhood, another area with a large Shi'a population. The presence of armed personnel suggests Taliban authorities may have been anticipating solidarity protests inspired by developments in Herat.

#### 4.2. INTERNATIONAL FRAMING AND UN ENGAGEMENT

The developments in Herat coincided with renewed international attention on the situation in Afghanistan, including discussions at United Nations level.

On 8 June, the Officer-in-Charge and Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General (DSRSG) of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Georgette Gagnon, [briefed](#) the UN Security Council on the situation in the country. During her [remarks](#), she stated that “Afghanistan under

*the de facto authorities remains stable,”* while also highlighting ongoing restrictions on women and specifically referencing “[the detention of some 30 women in Herat.](#)”

Separately, Gagnon had recently travelled to Kabul, where she met Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban’s Minister of Foreign Affairs. According to [Al Emarah](#), the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan’s official media outlet, the meeting included discussions on the upcoming UN Security Council session, among other topics.

### 4.3. TALIBAN MESSAGING: FROM DENIAL TO ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Following widespread reporting of the arrests, Taliban officials initially denied the allegations.

On 8 June, the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MoPVPV) spokesperson Saif ul Islam Khyber stated through pro-Taliban media outlet, [Hurriyat Radio](#) that no women had been arrested for violating hijab rules in Herat. On June 9 he denied the claims again in an audio clip posted by state-run [Radio Television Afghanistan](#) (RTA), adding that the ministry’s mandate was inviting and encouraging women for hijab but reports alleging enforcing the hijab through force or torture were untrue.

On 9 June, Herat DoPVPV director Sheikh Aziz ur Rahman al-Muhajir similarly rejected the reports, describing them as propaganda. The Herat branch of state-run [Bakhtar News Agency](#) posted an audio clip in which Muhajir stated that not a single woman was arrested in Herat.

However, later, on 9 June, Khyber participated in an [X Space](#) discussion in which he implicitly acknowledged that women had been detained. Between 01:35:13 and 01:36:06 of the audio recording, he stated that there were “*two separate issues*”: the detention of women in general in Herat province and the detention of women specifically for violating hijab requirements.

Khyber explained that women could be detained in relation to complaints involving family or moral disputes and that various government departments, including the DoPVPV, regularly intervene in such cases. However, he maintained that “*detaining women for not observing the hijab*” and reports of ombudsmen engaging in public altercations or violence against women were “*impossible*” and “*far from reality.*”

He also addressed the protests in Herat, describing them as a coordinated “*project*”. Between 01:37:11 and 01:38:00 of the same X Space discussion, he claimed that after an initial phase of “*spreading misinformation*” about the arrests had failed, a “*Plan B*” had been implemented. According to Khyber, this involved

organising protests to create the impression that the reported arrests had occurred and to present the demonstrations as a reaction to them.

On 11 June, Taliban governor Sheikh Noor Ahmad Islamjar publicly confirmed to [Tolo News](#) that a hijab enforcement campaign was underway in Herat province. He stated that the decision followed years of discussions between provincial authorities and local communities regarding declining hijab compliance.

During the interview, Islamjar acknowledged that women had been detained, although he framed the process as advisory rather than punitive. He stated that some individuals had been “collected” from the city and taken to a secure location where they were advised on appropriate dress requirements before being released following a family guarantee. He rejected reports that women had been imprisoned and maintained that female officers were responsible for enforcement activities.

## Types of Islamic veils

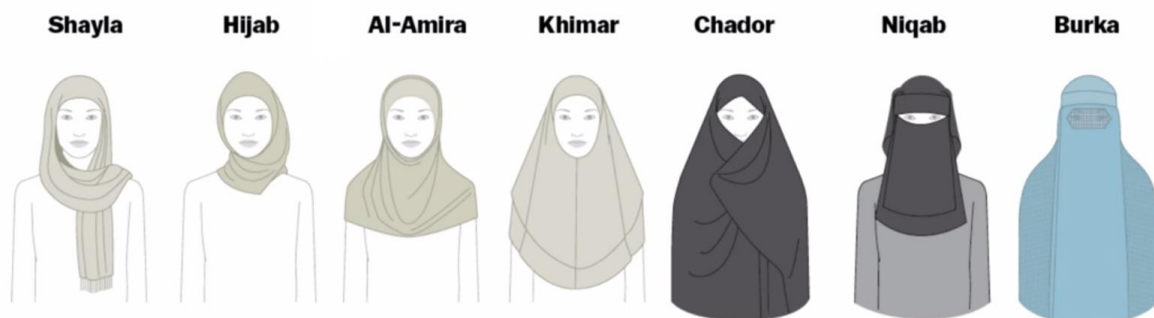


Figure 2: Types of Islamic veils. Chador, also known as chadar namaz is a loose, head-to-toe veil-like garment. Source: [Público](#) (archived); illustration by Monica Serrano, based on BBC reference material.

Islamjar rejected reports of male officers arresting women, saying enforcement is carried out by a female team with experience in security and detention. According to him, this team, supported by a secure transport vehicle, operates alongside the male ombudsmen of the DoPVPV and intervenes only when necessary. He said those detained are taken to a safe location, advised observing hijab, and released after a family guarantee, describing the process as safe and temporary rather than punitive.

Islamjar urged the public not to be misled by “propaganda” and denied that any woman had been imprisoned for hijab violations, though he acknowledged a small number had been detained and advised by female officers. He encouraged

residents to prevent what he described as immorality or hijab violations influenced by foreign ideas or migration experiences.

He concluded by saying Herat is secure and development projects are ongoing, and that authorities remain open to public complaints about officials including the DoPVPV, emphasizing shared responsibility for maintaining order in the province.

#### 4.4. DISINFORMATION AND AI

The developments in Herat were accompanied by a parallel wave of online misinformation, primarily circulated by anti-Taliban accounts. AW identified at least two widely shared instances of AI-generated or manipulated content that were presented as authentic footage of events in Herat.

On 8 June, Today News, an Instagram account with approximately 177,000 followers, shared a video purportedly showing Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (MoPVPV) ombudsmen grabbing and dragging women through the streets. The footage was subsequently redistributed across several social media platforms, including by [Khorasan International](#), a digital news outlet with more than 16,200 followers on X and 27,800 followers on [Instagram](#).

AW analysis indicates that the footage was fully AI generated. Several inconsistencies were identified, including environmental details that did not correspond with the alleged location and the behaviour of the purported DoPVPV ombudsmen, which did not align with known Taliban operating patterns and enforcement practices.



Figure 3: Screenshots of AI generated footage showing Taliban PVPV ombudsmen grabbing women from the streets.

On 9 June, [Today News](#) shared a second misleading video. The footage purportedly showed an armed Taliban member walking through a crowd of women before turning towards one individual and opening fire.

The accompanying Instagram caption claimed that the “*woman narrowly escaped death; the bullet missed her head and hit the wall behind her.*”

AW identified that the footage had been altered from an original video previously shared by reputable outlets, including [Amu TV](#), [BBC Dari](#), and [Etilaatroz](#). While the original videos showed an armed Taliban member running through a crowd, only the version distributed by Today News contained the alleged shooting sequence.

Within several days, the manipulated video had received more than 21,800 likes on Instagram and circulated widely on X, including being redistributed by the [Afghanistan Green Trend](#) (AGT).

Further analysis of Today News' [Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#) accounts suggests that a significant proportion of the account's content appears to be AI generated.

#### 4.5. STATEMENTS AND ACTIVITY FROM RESISTANCE GROUPS

Several armed opposition groups sought to capitalise on the unrest in Herat, using the developments to amplify messaging and, in some cases, claim operational activity.

On 7 June, during the period of reported arrests in Herat city, [AGT](#) publicly called on young people in the province to contact the group in order to obtain “*equipment and guidance*” to “*take revenge*.” The group also reshared a [contact number](#) with a French country code for individuals seeking to establish communication.

On 9 June, both the [Afghanistan Freedom Front](#) (AFF) and [National Resistance Front](#) (NRF) issued statements on X condemning the arrests of women and reports of extortion targeting their families. Both groups framed the events in Herat as part of a broader pattern of Taliban abuses against women.

On 10 June, the Islamic Liberation Movement (ILM), a Herat-based armed opposition group that had been largely inactive for several months, [re-emerged](#) publicly and [claimed](#) responsibility for an attack against DoPVPV officials in the Maslakh area of Herat, near the provincial capital. The group stated that the attack resulted in the killing of two individuals.

On 12 June, the [AFF](#) shared footage purporting to show an attack against DoPVPV officials in Herat city. In accompanying messaging, the group also urged local civilians to maintain distance from Taliban military vehicles and “*terrorist gathering sites*,” signalling an intent to continue targeting DoPVPV personnel.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

In a context where a Sunni-dominated movement such as the Taliban has a documented history of anti-Shi'a rhetoric and violence, intensified restrictions,

arrests, and moral policing in Shi'a-majority areas are not neutral. These can be read as a sectarian threat rather than routine law enforcement, resulting in clashes with an already disgruntled population.

The reporting on Herat in June 2026 shows a sequence of enforcement actions involving the arrest of women by the DoPVPV over alleged dress code violations, followed by implementation measures across the city and subsequent public response. Across the reporting period, Taliban messaging shifted from initial denials of the arrests by spokespersons, to more qualified acknowledgements of detentions, and ultimately to confirmation by the provincial governor that a hijab enforcement campaign was underway.

The events were accompanied by protests in Herat and a visible security response, including reported use of force and increased deployment of armed units in the city and surrounding areas. Several armed opposition groups issued statements in response to the developments, including condemnation of the reported arrests of women and claims of attacks against DoPVPV personnel, reflecting parallel engagement with the same set of events.

The information environment surrounding the events included both verified reporting and AI-generated or manipulated content circulating on social media, contributing to competing narratives regarding the nature and scale of the reported arrests.

For many residents, especially women targeted both as individuals and as members of an ethnic and religious minority, confrontation with the de facto authorities may therefore be understood as a defence of basic survival and dignity, not only as a reaction to specific events.