

## Newsletter, September 19, 2023

Dear Friends,

Some curious people had asked us to report from Afghanistan as soon as we arrived. We did so. We are sending the resulting report to all other readers of our newsletters, with hardly any changes:

### **First impressions from Kabul**

Ewas is responsible for the cleanliness of the rooms in OFARIN's office. He belongs to the Hazara people, who are often a disadvantaged minority in Afghanistan. Like pretty much everyone here, he thinks the radical restrictions on the education of women and girls are completely wrong. "Where are enough doctors and teachers going to come from in the future for our women and girls to go to?" Finally, the Taliban ride on strict gender segregation. Women can only be examined by female doctors and girls can only be taught by female teachers.

But otherwise, Ewas is happy with the government. He can finally go and travel wherever he wants without danger. Also, he says, it is now unimportant which people one belongs to. Fears that the Taliban would exploit their position of power to drive the Hazara in particular out of their traditional settlement areas have not been confirmed. The Taliban had ensured peace among the ethnic groups. Nor, he said, was there any investigation into who had been what in the war between the Republic's supporters and the Taliban. And the administration is nowhere near as corrupt as it was in the republic.

Later conversations put the picture into perspective. In fact, it is the policy of the Taliban leadership to avoid clashes among ethnic groups and to make peace with former enemies. In particular, former government soldiers up to the rank of general now serve with the Taliban forces.

But many individual cases do not fit into the idyllic picture of Ewas. Our former manager had to go into hiding because a senior official appointed by the Taliban took pleasure in labeling him an Iranian spy and obtaining an arrest warrant for him. The office manager of another foreign aid organization was called corrupt by a similar Taliban official. The official asked the organization to fire the office manager without providing any evidence.

A man enters a barbershop and greets an acquaintance there who is waiting for his treatment. "Gee, there you are. I thought they had arrested you."- "Yes, they had arrested me. But now they've released me." The released man says he gave a ride to a lady he knew in his brand new car. They were stopped and both beaten and abused, he says. A woman is not allowed to be in the company of a man who is not part of her family. That was the case here. The Taliban then offered to refrain from further abuse and not to publish the abused as wrongdoers on Facebook if he signed his new car over to them. He had no choice but to do so. Presumably, the Taliban commando was a purely private initiative that only wanted to steal the car from the beginning.

An older gentleman has his eye on our young colleague. He would like to take her into his harem as a third wife. The colleague and her family reject this in horror. The man went to the

Taliban and explains that the colleague is totally corrupted by working with us foreigners. Otherwise, she would have accepted his offer. The Taliban summons the colleague's father and puts him under pressure. The family flees abroad.

An Afghan friend and I picked up compatriots from the airport. Now we are driving back to the Kabul office. A vehicle overtakes us. According to their hairstyles, the passengers are Taliban, probably police. They give us a sign to stop. We pull over to the side of the road. Another vehicle stops behind us. The driver - according to his hairstyle also a Talib - jumps out of the car and pulls out a pistol. The first Taliban flee. The man with the pistol is a real Taliban policeman. He was taking his children to school. In the crew of the other vehicle he recognized criminals who wanted to kidnap us.

Members of the Taliban government cannot agree on important issues, such as education and freedom of movement for women and girls. The Emir Hobaitullah has issued very restrictive orders. Most ministers were strongly opposed to them. But they could not expose the emir by contradicting his orders. This is the way to deal with minor Taliban princes: If a Taliban department head frames a blameless person as an Iranian spy or as corrupt, other Taliban know it's nonsense. But they don't set the record straight because that would cost the department head, one of their own, face. This esprit de corps makes many Taliban little kings in their world, where they themselves make law.

Attacks by criminal gangs masquerading as Taliban are often not prosecuted, presumably because the Taliban in disguise might be real Taliban.

In most cases, arbitrariness comes from "smaller" Taliban and not from "higher up," i.e., from the government. In contrast, the action against Afghan journalists seems to be coordinated by the government. Anyone who is a journalist suspected of expressing anti-government sentiment in the media or on "social networks" is at risk.

Overall, one gets the impression that the Taliban leadership has a fairly reasonable policy on issues on which it can agree. The administration is credited with operating more efficiently than the administration did during the democratic period. The Taliban have tackled the drug problem with determination but also with brutality. Drug addicts who relapse after detoxification treatment are shot. International support could save many of those affected. If the Taliban would agree on a reasonable policy regarding the education and freedom of movement of women and girls, and manage their followers more strictly, Afghanistan would be on the right track.

The evening we arrived, the engagement party of a colleague's sister was taking place. It took place in one of the wedding palaces. The celebration is separated by gender - on one floor at least 200 men, on the other floor 200 women with 50 small children. Sometimes there are over 500 people per floor. In republican times, this was accompanied by blaringly loud music performed by a band on one floor and broadcast to the other floor. The Taliban now only allow monotonous religious chanting by male choirs as music - nothing for engagements. I asked if there had been music at this ceremony. The participants grinned. "Yes, there was music at the women's." Someone had brought music on a stick, they said, and it was broadcast over the loudspeakers. "Was there any trouble for the organizers because of that?" - "We didn't hear anything about that."

### Three weeks later

In the meantime, more than half of September has passed. But the first impressions were already correct. Taliban attacks are not punished because they could damage the movement's reputation. That undermines the rule of law. However, the Taliban make no effort to hold their supporters accountable like normal citizens.

Unfortunately, there is also no sign of how the school policy of Emir Hobaitullah, the head of state, is to continue. Already with the "old Taliban", but now also with the "new ones", I had met many leading personalities who know what is important for the future of their country, who think constructively and pragmatically. An emir who denies girls and women any education doesn't fit in with them at all. For an economy that is supposed to feed its country, this guy is insane. Sure, knowing about the bitter battles that have been going on in Afghanistan over "modernization" and "tradition" for at least a century, this emir and his thinking is no surprise. I meet a lot of "reasonable" Taliban because they like to show me how they think and hope for friendly cooperation. Afghans who think like their emir do not expect anything positive from contacts with me. They avoid me.

Therefore, I, a foreigner, am not the one to find out how big the percentage of the "progressive" and the "backward" Taliban is. I can ask my Afghan colleagues and friends about that. But what they assess is not objective either. I hear from all people that not only the majority of people, but also most Taliban reject the obstruction of education for women. At least the attitude of the Taliban cabinet is in line with those attitudes. Those, who think this way, like the Emir, are a small minority.

But the Taliban cabinet does not make decisions according to democratic rules. Basically, we foreigners know nothing about the Taliban's decision-making procedures. It is conceivable that the Taliban leadership can live with not making a decision in the face of controversial interests, and opposing attitudes remain side by side.

The emir has made a decision. The majority of Taliban ministers are appalled. But if they openly contradict the head of state, or openly act differently than he has decreed, he is finished as supreme. The Taliban's state structure collapses.

Thus, the practice of life will result in the emir's word not being challenged, but everyone acting as they see fit. Certainly, it will take a while before women are allowed to study. But the fact that older girls, who should not be allowed to study, are attending classes is already creeping in. Perhaps even the miracle will happen that the Emir's teaching bans will be lifted after all. Until then, a lot will be demanded of someone who travels to Afghanistan to approach everything with an open mind and common sense.

When we arrived in Kabul, we wanted to find out how much the practice had already adapted to what people wanted. In early July, the Ministry of Education had told foreign aid organizations involved in education to suspend their work until further notice. A written statement of reasons would be sent to everyone shortly. So far, no one has been sent anything. We had come to know some officials from the Ministry of Education as pragmatists. We sent staff to them to get a feel for what is now possible in the classroom. However, our colleagues did not meet constructive-minded officials, but a department head

responsible for cooperation with foreign aid organizations. The positions for department heads or higher batches had otherwise been filled by the Taliban with their own people. This department head, however, was not a Talib. However, he had not been dismissed. He thanked the backward Taliban faction for that by being loyal to the line. He told our people that all international aid organizations that wanted to continue working with the Ministry of Education would have to transform themselves into Afghan aid organizations or cancel their contract with the Ministry of Education. Afghan aid organizations have a much weaker standing with Afghan authorities than international organizations. For example, Afghan organizations can only fill their posts with the consent of the partner ministry. The ministry can reject personnel proposals from the Afghan organization and use its own candidates instead. This is how many Taliban currently end up on the payrolls of Afghan organizations. OFARIN will not become an Afghan aid organization. It is also inconceivable that international aid organizations such as IRC, ACTED, or UNICEF, which fund the teaching of thousands of classes, will become Afghan organizations.

In any case, our staff asked if the department head could give them his order in writing. The official replied in the negative. It is true that he himself had received such a letter from "the very top." He showed our people a letter from a distance so that they could not read anything. He would not let third parties read this letter. He would also not pass on the contents in writing. Our colleagues asked about the reason for the secrecy. The head of department explained that everything would immediately be published in the media if others could read it. With that, the official had actually said enough about the administrative actions of his ministry.

At OFARIN, we discussed the situation and decided that we would not take note of the orders that had only been issued verbally, and so we would continue our lessons. However, we have to submit a financial report to the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Finance every six months. This must be countersigned by the partner ministries with which we actually cooperate. If the Ministry of Education countersigns, OFARIN can continue its cooperation. If the Ministry of Education refuses to sign, OFARIN will continue its classes "unofficially".

We will talk through with all classes at all sites whether they want to continue working under these circumstances. In case of control, they would have to say that the classes are financed by the families of the participants. In fact, OFARIN is willing to fund such classes as before with materials and teacher salaries. Some classes only want to come together for religious instruction. We cannot support these classes. Discussions have not yet taken place with all locations. In Kabul's Arsan Qimat district, there are plans to expand classes. Classes are to begin in Khost province. The restart of the very popular preschool education is also being considered. We will inform about the further development of the teaching system.

OFARIN is also planning activities in the field of agriculture. For example, 20,000 walnut trees are to be planted on 2 square kilometers of land in Khost province. The project is to begin as early as this fall. The Ministry of Economy has approved the program. The approval of the Ministry of Agriculture is expected soon.

The seedlings for the nut trees will be purchased and planted this winter by members of the tribe on whose territory the program will take place. From March 2024, the trees that are

planted will only need to be protected and cared for. That, too, will be taken care of by the members of the affected tribes. Regular training sessions for those involved are planned. In March 2027, the tribe will take over the young trees, which will then bear their first fruit.

The project contributes to the reforestation of an area that used to be rich in forests, but where deforestation has been ruthless over the last hundred years. Since the nuts are a harvested commodity whose value exceeds that of a one-time deforestation of the trees, the people will also protect and preserve the trees once they have passed into their care.

Another agricultural project is likely to be the construction of a barn for 25 cows and a bull on the outskirts of Kabul. The project is expected to be implemented in 2024 and 2025. An application will be made to the Ministries of Economy and Agriculture.

We find the prohibition that female trainers - i.e. supervisors of the classes - are not allowed to be in our office very annoying. If a girls' class is to be visited or teachers are to be prepared for new lessons in a seminar, we have to pick up the trainers at their private homes. They can hardly prepare for their appearance together. The subsequent reporting to their colleagues in the office is secret. At first, female employees of teaching aid organizations were allowed to come to their workplaces on the basis of gender segregation. But then, the emir had become so annoyed by women's protests against his teaching policy that he harassed the ladies in this way. Now, only women employed by medical aid organizations are allowed to go to their offices.

This gave rise to the idea of a medical project at OFARIN. In the last decade, many midwives have been trained in Afghanistan. In some of our teaching areas, we have insight into the lives of most families through our teachers, trainers and coaches. We now want to establish a counseling system for pregnant women and women in childbirth in no more than three Kabul teaching areas where we actually know most of the families. There are trained midwives in our teaching areas. We are discussing the details of such a program with such ladies. This idea was born in the circle of male employees. It was immediately clear that the program should not just be a backdoor way for female employees to come back to the office. There was immediate enthusiasm for a midwifery program and the importance of such a program was recognized and emphasized by the men.

Negotiations are still needed here with the Ministry of Economy and then with the Ministry of Public Health. We hope early 2024 with the use of midwives.

Dear readers, some of you will rub your eyes at how we are loosely expanding our areas of work here. After all, it's going to cost. Yes, it does. At OFARIN, we are thinking of spending significantly more than we have in the past. We are fortunate that a very potent donor has joined us. However, this person values anonymity. We respect that, of course, and ask you to do likewise. We now have possibilities that go even beyond what has been outlined here. We want to do all that, but we also want to improve what we have done quite well for decades - our teaching program. Right now, our commitment requires, first and foremost, adjusting our staffing capabilities. That takes time. A community like OFARIN needs to grow at a natural pace. The really good relationships we have among our members and staff in Afghanistan and in Germany are worth a lot. I don't want to trade them for sheer size.

I don't want any of our donors to think, "OFARIN has had enough now. They don't need me anymore." It is true that it is not a threat to OFARIN's existence now if you lower your contribution a little. But we still need your committed and critical thinking – and a little bit of your heart. Stay with us! Many things are now possible that we have only dreamed of so far. If we are lucky, we will achieve a lot and have a lot of fun doing it. And you should be there.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek.*