

NEWSLETTER; SEPTEMBER 21, 2022

Dear Friends,

This newsletter is intended to give an insight into our situation. It will not be an insight. We do not have it ourselves yet.

Welcome to Kabul: Two German compatriots have arrived. Hadji Latif and I picked them up at the airport early this morning and are now driving with them to our office. We have already driven several kilometers on the six-lane roads. We are not driving fast but on the far left because the traffic on our right is moving slowly. Behind us, a vehicle is tailgating and wants to overtake us. When the opportunity presents itself, Haji Latif swerves to the right. The vehicle behind us overtakes us and signals us to pull over to the right. It is occupied by three men. Judging by their hairstyles, they are Taliban. They are probably policemen who have something to say about Hadji Latif's driving. Their vehicle stops on the right side of the road. We stop behind it.

Another vehicle appears behind us. The driver jumps out, runs to us and pulls out a pistol. From his appearance, he too is a Talib. (Taliban is the plural of talib. Talib means student of religion.) Through the open driver's window he reassures us: He is a policeman. Those in the other vehicle are criminals who want to kidnap us.

There are many children in his vehicle, which is behind ours. The man, who is in fact a policeman, wanted to take the children to school when he saw through the situation we got into and intervened. He preferred not to shoot because of the children in his car. The criminals in the car in front of us accelerated and sped off.

Can you learn to govern? In Germany, I thought our government should make some concessions to the Taliban. They won the war against democracy and human rights. Women were hit particularly hard. It is also true that the Taliban are not keeping promises they made to the West when its military withdrawal was agreed.

All ethnic groups were to have a fair share of power in the state. None of that is in evidence. Pashtuns, who make up just over one-third of the population, occupy almost all leadership positions. Islamist terrorists should not be able to re-establish themselves in Afghanistan. A month ago, the head of al-Qaeda, the terrorist organization that organized the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, was killed by a U.S. drone while on the balcony of the Taliban interior minister's home. Women should have rights to education and employment. Now they are not even allowed to attend middle school.

Nevertheless, when the West isolates Afghanistan, it drives the country into the arms of "partners" like Iran, Russia, China or Pakistan. In doing so, the West is not doing itself any favors. It would also have been possible to influence the rights of women and other ethnic groups by making some concessions. In view of my own experience with the "old Taliban," i.e., those who ruled until 2001, I had a lot of confidence in the pragmatism and heterogeneity of the Taliban movement.

Then, when we arrived in Afghanistan, we quickly discovered that the rule of the new Taliban - seen up close - is nowhere near as mild and "half as bad" as it looked from home. In various areas - in the Punjir and north of the Hindu Kush - fighting is still going on or there is new unrest. Apparently young men are being killed to prevent them from joining resistance movements. The numbers of people killed in fighting, as well as in earthquakes, landslides, or in Da'esch (i.e., "Islamic State") attacks, are officially reported to be far lower than they actually are. There is much hatred and individual addiction to revenge. People who have worked for the government or for foreigners are not safe from attack even now.

Nevertheless, one may believe the official statements of some leading Taliban that they are in favor of peace and reconciliation among the population and call on previous enemies to participate in the peaceful rebuilding of the country. How else to avoid internal antagonisms leading to civil war and foreign interference?

But not all Taliban leaders promote reconciliation and understanding. Others are more concerned with enforcing the laws of Sharia and the culture of the Afghan people. Yet the Taliban are hardly likely to be familiar with Sharia law and its broad possibilities. Thus, they limit themselves to enforcing Afghan traditions, or more precisely, the customs of the people in the rural areas, with tight patriarchy and hatred of all other ethnic groups, religions and denominations. The messages of these politicians go down much better with the mass of Taliban, who themselves come from the rural areas, than appeals for reconciliation and constructive cooperation.

Taliban warriors have spent more than two decades thinking about how to attack fuel transports or government posts. They had not given a thought to how to live and work together with other ethnicities and denominations or even adherents of other forms of government and lifestyles - why should they? They had to be defeated and then forced to live down-to-earth, godly lives - what else?

Let's look at the administrative structure the Taliban created! They left most of the lower administrative posts unchanged. They have filled the higher positions from Ra'is on with their own people. Ra'is can be translated as head of department. In the administrative hierarchy, rais'es are the lowest ranks with decision-making authority. Hundreds of rais'es and higher decision-makers are needed for national ministries. They are also needed for subordinate authorities, for the ministries of the forty or so provinces and for the districts. The Taliban state needs several thousand rais'es and senior officials.

Where do you get them? Even if you wanted to, you won't find a hundred people among those who have been warriors and minor commanders who realize that only a peaceful settlement will lead past further bloodshed, civil war and foreign interference. For the other decision-makers, the world is quite clearly populated: People who are not Pashtuns cannot be trusted, and most Pashtuns can hardly be trusted. Shiites are infidels. Foreigners are spies. Schools are enemies of Islam.

The worldview of these decision-makers does not promote prosperous coexistence. Above all, the world of experience of these people is far removed from anything that a reasonably functioning administration needs. The fact that an administration that others have to obey must itself meet deadlines is an imposition for a Taliban Ra'is.

We need the consent of our partner ministry to pay wages to our teachers. We were able to get money into Afghanistan to finally pay wages that we owe our teachers. The Feast of Sacrifice was near. The faithful buy cows, goats, sheep or chickens, if they can, to slaughter them, to eat them themselves and to give meat to friends or poor fellow human beings. In doing so, they are fulfilling a religious duty. Our office had already urged our partner ministry five times in writing and even more often by telephone to approve the payment of the due wage money. But the minister did not find time to put the stamp under our request for weeks. The Ra'is did not allow the payment. Our head of administration called me in Germany in his distress. We decided to pay the wages before the festival even without Taliban permission. Now the Ra'is is reproaching us severely for not waiting until the minister had time for our request and is preventing any wage payment to teachers. How are we supposed to get along with such partners? The Afghan citizens do not have it any easier with their offices, and there is no interaction between the offices either. Nothing works.

The composition of this administration is full of predetermined breaking points. The ordinary civil servants under the rais'es have been kept on. The upper class of rais'es and higher decision-

makers are, for the most part, unable to read or write. At best, they are Pashto literate. The official language in most parts of the country, however, is Dari. Few rais'er can read this language. So they depend heavily on the underclass of old officials. This underclass fears its new masters, despises them, and cheats and exploits them.

Maybe four months ago, an old friend called: "When are you coming to Kabul? When you get there, I'll pick you up. We can now run your program in our province. There is a lot of freedom. There are many opportunities." Now I am in Kabul, and the friend is sitting across from me. "No, this government cannot create state structures. It is incapable. It is getting worse every day." - "What will happen then?" - "There will be riots and civil war."

The Ariana Hospital: Anne Marie and I need a work permit. The background to this story is unpleasant. I'll spare you that. For the work permit, we have to undergo a medical examination - by an ophthalmologist, a dermatologist, a laboratory has to be involved - a total of eight specialists are supposed to work on us. Where do you go? Apparently, there are several hospitals that can do this. We choose the Ariana Hospital and drive there with engineer Nagib.

A six-story building welcomes us. Everything is scrupulously clean. The numerous patients find their way around without difficulty. In each department we wait a reasonable time and then it is our turn. Everywhere we are treated by friendly doctors and nice staff. The equipment is usually not the newest. In German hospitals, there were corresponding devices twenty years ago. But they measured sufficiently well, perhaps to one decimal place less precisely and ten seconds slower than today's technology. But the technology here is sufficient, just as it was for us two decades ago. The processes are well-rehearsed. Female and male employees work together professionally. I'm not a doctor. But Ariana Hospital is impressively well organized.

The engineer tells us that it was built by an Afghan doctor from Nangarhar province. Even difficult operations, for example on the heart, are performed here. There are several other hospitals in Kabul that operate similarly.

Afghans can organize at a high level if you let them.

Visit from Sovid: In our teaching area "Ser-e-Kotal" in Kabul, things have not been running smoothly for a long time. We were once lured there by Qarizadah, a mullah and official from the partner ministry. The area was so poor that we didn't have the heart to do nothing there. That was maybe 15 years ago.

Now we are dissatisfied. The number of students is going down. Some classes have been closed, including all the boys' classes. Is that because of Qarizadah? In Ser-e-Kotal, he is a leader - but a controversial one. Families with whom he has disputes don't send their children to our classes.

In Ser-e-Kotal, Fausia and Sovid are responsible for supervising the classes as trainers. Both are homegrown. They were students with us, then teachers and finally trainers. So far, we have not received any clear answers from them when we have asked for reasons for the poor attendance in class.

Put yourself in the shoes of our female coaches and teachers! For years, OFARIN's leadership has been complaining about poor attendance, but doing nothing about it. The trainers and teachers want to teach classes. They know why things are not going well. OFARIN's leadership is unhappy with Qarizadah, but keeps avoiding the break. Yes, Qarizadah had built a very spacious house for himself and his family. That's where we had moved all the lessons. OFARIN helped to equip the new rooms for the lessons. Trainers and teachers preferred not to mess with such an alliance. If they revealed

what was wrong with the lessons, OFARIN would not believe them and they would be fired as troublemakers.

A few weeks before our arrival, our office manager Abdul Hussain had spoken to Qarizadah in plain language. He announced that he would stop teaching in Ser-e-Kotal. When we were there, he said, the final decision would be made. But we already agreed on the phone: Ser-e-Kotal will be closed.

Somehow the trainers and teachers already knew that. They also knew: this is the end of Ser-e-Kotal if they don't act.

Now when we arrived in Kabul, Sovida, the younger of the trainers, came to our office. Fausia is the older trainer. She is married and has one child. Fausia's brother had been killed in an attack a few days ago. Therefore, Sovida came alone. She is not twenty. You can feel the honesty she exudes.

Without further ado, she told us that Qarizadah collects fees for our lessons from all the teachers and also from the students, and gave figures for this. We looked at each other in dismay. We had already suspected something like that. But as long as we did not seriously draw consequences from grievances, coaches, teachers and students did not dare to say anything to us.

Sovida and her colleagues had long since moved on. Down in the valley, they had found a madressah. That's where classes can be held.

A madressah is a religious school. Small mosques are also called madressahs. If a madressah is a mosque, we are not allowed to hold classes for girls there. But Sovida's madressah was created by citizens to have a religious education center in their area. Now they gladly accept other teaching programs, especially those for girls. The classes are compatible with Taliban rules.

General point about teaching: The previous section highlights the situation in Ser-e-Kotal and the courageous actions of Sovida and her colleagues. This is unfair, because in pretty much all the areas where our program runs, valiant women - sometimes men - have pitched in to continue the teaching that OFARIN offers to the population. I am touched when I see the sacrifices that are made.

The difficulties in Ser-e-Kotal are due to Qarizadah. Everywhere else, our teaching suffers under Taliban regulations. The ministry, our "partner," has banned classes for girls in mosques. Teaching is also not allowed in private homes. This also affects the boys. But they are at least allowed to continue in the mosques.

For the girls, the Taliban regulations have taken away almost all previous opportunities for instruction. Well, in Bini-Hissar, the white beards forced their imam to allow classes for little girls in the mosque. The whitebeards are the council of elders in the community. A mullah lives in part on the contributions of the faithful. These are required to donate a portion of their income for religious purposes. The Muslim can give this religious tax to his imam. He can also donate it to religious foundations or the poor. I have seen congregations literally mob out their imam.

Some rooms on the edge of the mosque complex in Qalacha belong to the community. But they are not a mosque. There have always been classes for girls there. Now the rooms are used around the clock. But that is not enough. Female teachers found eight other rooms that they rented. In Afshar, they rented a garage. It is enough for the four classes there during the day. In Reschkor, teachers found three rooms and a hallway. In Dasht-e-Bartschi, eighteen classes are scattered far and wide. A wide variety of rooms were rented here.

Teachers everywhere have set out and found rooms in which to teach. These can be used all day. Often rent has to be paid. To do this, the teachers concerned pool their resources. They sacrifice up

to one third of their wages for this. Their monthly salary is 3000 Afghani. This currently corresponds to 33 €. OFARIN's teachers teach only 90 minutes a day. The rents that the teachers negotiate are incredibly cheap. OFARIN, as a foreign organization, would have to pay many times more. Besides, we are glad that we are not tenants ourselves. Otherwise, we would soon have to pay rent for classrooms everywhere in addition to teachers' salaries, combined with constant haggling over the amount of rent. This would make teaching more expensive, or OFARIN would have to reduce the number of its classes. We hope that the partner ministry will lift the arbitrary ban on classes in private apartments and that rent payments will be eliminated. These considerations should not distract from the bravura with which our teachers - sometimes even teachers - fight for their classes. Words fail me.

Our "partner ministry" for Religious Affairs - apparently as revenge for the above-mentioned payment of teachers' salaries before the Feast of Sacrifice - has blocked further salary payments. First, a new protocol - i.e., a contract on cooperation - would have to be concluded. The Ra'is in charge announced proposals for this a month ago. So far, he has not sent them. Usually, in such a case, one would agree on further cooperation according to previous rules until the new protocol is signed. The Ra'is rejects this.

In the long run, OFARIN is not helpless against such hostility - or is it incompetence? - is not helpless. Several ministries (the Border Ministry, the Ministry of Agriculture, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, ...) have departments for education. Even before the Taliban came to power, we had thought of cooperating with one of the various departments of the Ministry of Education. It should be easy, at least for some of our classes, to find ministries with which a partnership is more problem-free than with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. In particular, classes in private homes will not be a problem for other partners.

We will find a way out of the trouble we are in. Unfortunately, all of this requires an enormous amount of time under the conditions of the Taliban administration. We need patience and good nerves. But we have that.

I would be unhappy about a final separation from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. OFARIN's program came into being in 1998 at the urging of that ministry. It is important to have the mullahs and the mosques on board if you want to move forward in Afghanistan.

Dear friends, our stay in Kabul gives much cause for chagrin. It is good that we are here at this stage. Surely it would be fine without us. Everything is fine here. But the community strengthens. And for us these experiences are important. There are many things we can't really assess yet, let alone put into the right words. We try.

Until now, female or male trainers were enough. They could attend every class. Now we need male trainers everywhere for the boys and female trainers for the girls. This requires additional staff. From the fact that they are temporarily blocking our payment of salary debts, please do not conclude that we are saving money! We will pay our debts as soon as the Taliban does not prevent it and we have the money.

Please, hang in there with us! Do not forget our valiant teachers! Our program is needed.

Best regards,

Peter Schwittek.