

Newsletter, JUNE 5, 2023

Dear Friends,

I returned from Afghanistan almost two weeks ago and am trying to sort out what I experienced: Before I left, there was a story in Kabul that the Taliban had invaded the office of a Western aid organization. Female employees had been sitting there at work. But the Taliban had banned foreign aid organizations from employing female staff. They had made exceptions for medical and educational projects. But women were not allowed in the offices of Western organizations. The women had violated this rule. The Taliban took physical action against them. The women fled.

By the way, the presence of women in the offices of Afghan aid organizations is not forbidden. Women work in hospitals or banks almost as normally as before the Taliban came. The Taliban had justified the severe restrictions on female employees of foreign organizations by the "impudence" of these women. Indeed, female employees of foreign organizations had publicly protested against regulations that massively restrict women's educational opportunities and freedom of movement.

The female employees of Western organizations had stood up for freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of movement, right to education; in short, for human rights and had shown civil courage. "This is the way it has to be." the supporters of the respective organizations in the home countries will have said to themselves. The foreign leaders of the organizations had done a good job. They had obviously instilled in their staff the right attitude toward the values we are concerned with: human rights, especially women's rights.

One should not unreservedly cheer this heroism. We Westerners wanted to give the Afghans a form of government in which human rights were embedded in democracy and the rule of law. Many Afghans rejected this. They wanted to live by the time-honored rules of their ancestors. They also feared that foreign values were incompatible with the precepts of Islam. The resistance to Western values was carried by the Taliban. War broke out. The Taliban won.

Anyone who enters Afghanistan now must abide by the order installed by the Taliban. The laws of the Taliban apply to him. He must expect to be punished according to their rules if he does not abide by their laws.

The heads of foreign organizations have a duty of care to their employees. They had no means to protect the women from the Taliban's incalculable punishments. They should have stopped the women from protesting.

The Taliban had fought and defeated the foreigners because they did not want to live according to their values. And now protesting women wanted to impose these very values on them again. Moreover, the Taliban were not entirely wrong in assuming that the foreigners themselves were behind the protests and were pushing their female collaborators forward.

What did the Afghan organizations do? They were not sanctioned by the Taliban for "insolence". Their female employees sit unchallenged in their offices with their male colleagues. At the same time, many Afghan aid organizations have no different goals than Western organizations. But they have not participated in public protests. They know their country. They know which forms of conflict are effective in Afghanistan and which are not.

The Taliban are divided on the question of whether to allow young girls and women to pursue school or academic education. Emir Haibatullah has been firm: Women and girls may learn primary school skills-but no more. Key ministers such as the defense minister and the interior minister were

appalled. They run campaigns explaining to the population how important education is for the country's development. Without women and girls being educated, in a few years you won't have female doctors to treat women and female teachers to teach girls. Yet powerful ministers avoid attacking the Emir Haibatullah personally.

To understand this better, one must start with education, namely that of Afghan boys who will one day become heads within the family or extended family. Women, who are responsible for the upbringing of young children, give them the impression that they are the greatest in the world. Their every wish is fulfilled. They hardly learn any limits to their actions. Leaders in politics and in the state were usually selected in childhood and adolescence to lead family structures as well. In the "Ethnokrimis" (See our homepage OFARIN.org!) you find more about it. Such machos must not be expected to do anything, whereby they "lose face". Opposing views must therefore be endured for a longer period of time without being exposed publicly. This way, both sides can save face while their conflict cools down. With a little luck, a golden bridge can be found over which to help the other side. If not, the conflict fades over time, and one side can quietly withdraw.

The Emir Haibatullah has publicly opposed the education of women and girls. He is thus preventing Afghanistan from quickly developing its educational opportunities and catching up economically with the rest of the world. The emir's statement probably even strengthens the people's desire for education. On the other hand, hundreds of thousands of Taliban have participated in a war against everything that has been modernizing Afghanistan for a century. The culture war – school versus mosque; slogan: "school is sin" – was part of this confrontation with modernity. The Taliban warriors have fought schools. Most are illiterate. The other Afghans who went to school while the Taliban were preparing for raids with their Kalashnikovs now have better prospects – yes, even the girls. Presumably, these warriors still need time to get rid of their enemy images. It is fair to say that the Emir is one of the few Taliban leaders who does not leave the fighters alone with their outdated war aims. The position of the Emir and the fighters will not be sustainable for long. The population and most Taliban leaders have long understood that Afghanistan needs schools and education.

Bridges have already been prepared over which the emir could sneak into the camp of the supporters of schools and education: After all, one is not against the education of girls in principle. One would only have to create the conditions first for the youth to be educated according to the principles of gender segregation. For this, more female teachers and lecturers are needed, as well as premises. In addition, dresses must be designed for the young girls that will not disturb the men. When all this has been prepared, girls and women should be trained again.

Probably we will not have to wait that long. After another few months, people will not remember exactly what the opponents said in this matter. Then, without public speech, people will return to teaching in schools and universities as it was before Taliban rule. But if now a notable representative of one side or the other loudly demanded progress or regression and even personally reproached his opponents, the dispute would be updated again and any progress would be prevented for many months.

Now the dispute over the education of women and young girls is the main topic in the public debate. It must die down even further before reason is allowed to prevail. That's why my certainty that women and girls will "soon" be allowed to learn again is a cynical consolation for a fifteen-year-old girl who wants to graduate from high school one day, or for a twenty-year-old woman who wants to become a teacher. If they are allowed to learn after all in a few years, they will be wives and mothers.

What does OFARIN do in this situation? I have already said that we foreigners in Afghanistan have to abide by the Taliban's commandments. But, isn't that the way to be taken? The Taliban can advertise

that Western organizations like OFARIN respect them as partners. In doing so, OFARIN solidifies their rule. The alternative would be not to go to Afghanistan. Then one would be morally on the safe side - at least at first glance.

We think it makes sense to provide a good elementary education for the population, regardless of the form of government and the other laws of a country, as long as that is possible. In Afghanistan, this is possible, even if it is somewhat hampered by the gender segregation desired by the Taliban and by the restrictions on the use of our female trainers. So, we do it.

Only through our presence and our work can we find out how narrowly the authorities with whom we cooperate interpret the official regulations and where, in agreement with Afghan officials, we do not have to take the official restrictions on what we do so closely without endangering our staff.

The rule of the old Taliban over most of the country from 1996 to 2001 was a dark time. All music was banned. Taliban warriors searched vehicles for music cassettes, destroyed them if they found any, and beat up passengers. Women did not need fine dresses because there were no festivals. Pictures and photos were forbidden, only passport photos for official purposes were allowed. No one invested. There was no construction activity. Mildew was on the economy and on all aspects of life. Then, in winking agreement with some influential Taliban, our organization at that time was able to offer the classes that became our program today. We were able to start something that radiated hope in hopeless times.

Are the present times worse than then, so that it is better not to dare anything? Music is forbidden again. But in the numerous wedding palaces of the city of Kabul, ruinously expensive weddings are celebrated as a matter of course. The ladies wear elaborate dresses. There are fine meals. Only music – as in those days – is forbidden. However, small carts drive through all the alleys offering ice cream and – depending on the company they belong to – playing a few bars from "für Elise" or "Happy birthday to you". Construction activity is progressing. Road construction projects started by the "democratic" regime continue. Who is financing it – I don't know. Teachers continue to be paid by the international community through UN agencies. More such funds may be coming into the country, perhaps from Arab countries. The Ministry of Finance has reorganized itself. It collects taxes correctly from companies and organizations.

The security situation has not been as good as it is now for decades. In the first months of Taliban rule, there were still brutal attacks by "Islamic State" fighters on Shiite minority classroom events. That has stopped.

We were also in Afghanistan last fall and had reported that people who did not consistently reject the Taliban did not give the new regime a chance. "They just can't manage to form a proper government." we heard from various observers at the time. This spring, we did not hear that assessment again.

Members of minority groups, such as the Hazara people, recalled with a shudder the rule of the "old Taliban." When the "new Taliban" came to power and did not harass them as the "old ones" had, they stereotypically declared: "They are still holding back. But once they're firmly in power, they want to do everything the way they used to." Now they can't cope with the fact that things didn't get as bad as they used to. "Yeah, they're not as brutal as they used to be. But what do they actually want?"

An Afghan who works for foreign journalists and knows and shares modern views, but who deals professionally with Taliban leaders, is impressed by how committed members of the Afghan Cabinet are and how seriously they are working to move the country forward. However, it must be added, that not all Taliban whom the turnaround flushed into leadership positions are up to their tasks.

The Taliban have integrated many soldiers from the "democratic" government into their armed forces, even some generals. Unfortunately, one cannot derive a rule from this. Neighbors who have a dispute with each other denounce their counterpart with some accusation, for example, that the daughter worked for foreigners "You know what happens there." Such things can have nasty consequences for the accused.

Our office manager is Hazara and Shiite. The responsible department head of our former partner ministry was a young man with few writing skills, but stuffed with all the prejudices of a strict Sunni. So he suspected our office manager of being an Iranian spy, because the Iranians are also Shiites. "If he gets arrested, we can't help him," my colleagues warned me last fall. We put our office manager on leave and advised him to stay in the province. Then, at Christmas, police officers showed up with a warrant for his arrest. The colleagues immediately helped the man and his family to go into hiding.

Another colleague, Nagib, had worked for us as a driver. He belonged to the clan of the last "democratic" head of state, Ashraf Ghani. The family of Ashraf Ghani asked him to work for them as a driver, namely the wife of the president. Nagib followed this request. He certainly earned better than with us. When Ashraf Ghani was expelled, Nagib became unemployed. We hired him again. We now traveled to Khost with him as our driver. On this route, we passed well over thirty controls. You are asked where you come from and where you are going. If the inspectors discover a foreigner driving along, he has to identify himself. This is done politely and correctly. Then you can continue your journey. No one wastes a thought on Nagib. Is he not at risk because of his previous employment? No, he is not.

But the example of our office manager shows that no one can guarantee that all Afghans are safe from the Taliban.

Nor should we conceal the fact that the country's huge drug problem is being fought by the Taliban with a furor that is frightening. Previous governments had ignored the drug problem. There were certain areas in the city of Kabul where drug addicts vegetated in growing colonies. There were private initiatives that took care of these people. Previous governments did nothing. The Taliban were different. They created huge sanatoriums where the sick are detoxified. A large part of these institutions is financed by the Alokozai beverage company. But the Taliban cannot offer the addicts more than detoxification. After detoxification, they are still addicted and at extreme risk of relapse. If they do relapse, they are shot by the Taliban. In this way, the Taliban reduce the drug problem decisively and brutally.

Replacing this procedure with a more humane one is beyond the Taliban's capabilities. At best, international support can help here. But Western aid is provided only through UN organizations. This is particularly expensive. For special tasks, it would be better for individual countries to get involved. Why doesn't Germany step in - or other European countries or the European Union? Western countries do not cooperate with the Taliban. They reject human rights. But so does Cambodia and many African countries, without being denied development aid. Germany does not even have diplomatic relations with Afghanistan. Why not? The U.S. doesn't have diplomatic relations either. And that is the crux of the matter.

The U.S. was attacked by Islamists in its own country in 2001. The leadership of these Islamists lived in Afghanistan and were protected by the Taliban. The UN General Assembly agreed to the U.S. desire to fight back militarily. The rest of us dutifully provided weapons assistance and participated in the civilian construction and military protection of a democratic Afghan state. The U.S. then broke off this engagement without consulting its allies or the Afghan state. We dutifully withdrew from Afghanistan

with the U.S.. Now there is no reason to deny diplomatic relations to the Taliban government, except that the U.S. has not established such relations either.

In this regard, it is not a disadvantage for the U.S. if allies in Afghanistan go ahead with establishing normal relations with the current Taliban state. There is no alternative to this state. The government is accepted by the population. There is no movement that could drive out the Taliban. At most, such a movement could be built and equipped by a neighboring country, which would mean civil war for Afghanistan. It is in everyone's interest for Afghanistan to become a stable country in this troubled region of the world. The current Afghanistan has what it takes.

Sure, there is still the issue of educating women and girls there; and also the gruesome Taliban way of solving the drug problem. But it is on these issues that benevolent potent countries can have a major impact. One could help Afghanistan provide medical treatment for recidivist drug addicts, even if the chances of success, like everywhere else in the world, are slim. Resistance to the education of women and girls would probably disappear if all Taliban warriors were given basic training in the cultural techniques of writing, reading and arithmetic.

However, one should consider what development aid one wants to provide in Afghanistan. In the school sector, GiZ and the large organizations of the other countries have squandered billions of euros and dollars during the "democratic period" and achieved nothing. The country's school and education system is unimaginably bad. The paternalistic thinking and bureaucratic acting apparatuses of international development aid, which in the end also have no control over the funds they administer, have completely failed in development cooperation in the school system.

As we traveled back to Kabul from Khost, we kept passing trucks loaded to the top with potatoes. My colleagues explained to me that these were Afghan potatoes. They had been grown in Afghanistan. But Afghanistan had no cold storage. So, the harvest was sold cheaply to Pakistan, where it spent the winter in cold storage. In the spring, they were then bought back at a high price. Presumably, the international community had provided Afghanistan with funds for cold storage. But these funds disappeared into corruption. Thus, Afghanistan does not have its own cold storage facilities – and not just for potatoes. It is certainly possible to organize the creation of cold storage facilities so that they are actually built. There are certainly many things that could be tackled together. But one would have to think a bit more about the way of cooperation and have the courage not to wait for big brother.

Finally, it is my sad duty to announce that our member Sigune Dankwort has died. Sigune had joined OFARIN only two years ago. However, we had known each other for a very long time and had a wonderful paddling trip on the Drava River. Sigune had traveled to Afghanistan in her younger years.

Warm greetings

Peter Schwittek.