

## Newsletter, August 13, 2021

Dear Friends,

after looking into Afghanistan's democratic past, now to speculations about the presumably Taliban-dominated future!

### What role will the Taliban play?

In the newspaper I find an article about the Afghan activist Sima Samar. Ms. Samar was Minister of Health after the fall of the Taliban. Later, she was an expert on human and women's rights for Western contacts. Ms. Samar fears that in the future she will not be sure what will happen to her when she leaves the house. Her memories of Taliban rule 20 years ago frighten her.

A few weeks ago, a bomb attack was carried out on a girls' school in a Shia neighborhood of Kabul. More than 70 schoolgirls and teachers were killed.

While still in Germany, a German friend asked me if I could advise him to visit a well-run hospital in the Afghan province that had been set up by a German nurse. The area around the hospital had long been fought over. It is now controlled by the Taliban. I strongly advised against going there. In Kabul, two employees of the hospital organization work in rooms of OFARIN's office. They, on the other hand, thought it could be arranged. They informed the hospital management. The hospital talked to both warring parties. The visit could take place. Then it had to be postponed for another day because senior Taliban wanted to welcome the visitor to the hospital but could not arrive fast enough. After that, everything went smoothly. My friend was able to inspect and take pictures of the hospital together with the doctors. The Taliban did not allow themselves to be photographed. But they presented the visitor with a calligraphically designed certificate thanking him and the German sponsors of the hospital for their commitment, as well as two beautiful bouquets of simple meadow flowers. Friend's comment: "I'm sure women put those together." He did not trust the gentlemen with the Kalashnikovs with such tasteful bouquets.

The Taliban movement was created by Pakistan, namely by its military intelligence agency ISI, in the 1990s to bring Afghanistan under Pakistani influence. The ISI imbued the Taliban with an ultra-Islamist ideology. This was intended to give the movement religious prestige among the conservative rural population and keep Afghanistan economically backward and weak. Most countries isolated Afghanistan, leaving it in the hands of Pakistan and Islamist radicals.

After the U.S. Air Force ousted the Taliban in 2001, the Taliban movement regained supporters because Western troops, namely the Americans, were unnecessarily brutal. Pakistan rearmed the Taliban. A tough war developed between Afghan government troops, supported by Western contingents, and the Taliban.

But the Afghan government also had to deal with other enemies, especially the "Islamic State." Presumably, these Afghan Da'esh, as they are called in the Orient, are also a creation of the ISI. The name of the Syrian and Iraqi Islamists was taken over to spread more terror. The Da'esh have carried out many attacks on educational institutions and on Shi'ite institutions in Afghanistan. The attack on the girls' school mentioned above bears the typical hallmarks of the Da'esh.

The Kabul government has accused the Taliban of committing this attack. However, the Taliban have never claimed responsibility for the attack, which they like to do after their own attacks. The Taliban are bitter enemies of the Da'esh.

Since the U.S. decided to withdraw militarily from Afghanistan and its allies joined in, it is clear that the Taliban will prevail in Afghanistan. The question is what kind of regime they want to establish.

If they install a regime like the one, they had before 2001, there will be resistance. Shiite areas, but also Afghan Tajiks, Turkmen and Uzbeks will resist. Foreign countries will strengthen such resistance with money, weapons and even personnel.

The Taliban have occupied the Wakhan tip, Afghanistan's easternmost strip of land, which borders China's Islamic provinces. If the Taliban are strictly Islamist, China cannot tolerate this out of its own interest. The same is true for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Iran will fight any aggressive Sunni neighbor. All these countries have good reasons to support and make strong Afghan resistance movements against the Taliban. Russia and Turkey are always interested in interfering, if only to distract from internal weaknesses.

The West has signaled that it wants to support a moderate Taliban regime to a certain extent. It can only justify this to its own population if the Taliban really moderate themselves. Thus, the Taliban will only avoid a terrible civil war fired from abroad if they do not act aggressively toward potential opponents at home and abroad. A radical Islamic appearance cannot be in their interest.

Official statements by the Taliban show this desire for moderation. Afghans who have served for the Western military are asked to remain in the country, where they are needed as specialists. Foreign aid organizations are asked to remain and work in Afghanistan.

Presumably, the Taliban leadership even sees that a proper division of tasks with the current government is more opportune than a final victory. Thus, some reasonably functional institutions could be used in the future. The government's military, especially the air force, could help drive out the Da'esh.

All of this would be too good to be true. But it could well be what the Taliban leadership is aiming for. But Afghan realities are not so clear-cut. Sure, many government bases are currently being overrun by the Taliban by prior agreement. "We're going to attack the day after tomorrow." - "Okay! We've pulled back until tomorrow night." You can't blame anyone involved for not wanting to lay down their lives for another confrontation that's been decided. But the overrunning of government posts does not always go off without bloodshed.

The motivations of the Taliban fighters and their numerous con-tenders are very different. Some may adhere to the ultra-Islamist ideas with which the Taliban spread fear and terror in the previous millennium. Even then, only a minority was convinced of this. For such old Taliban, it is really about the awakening to true Islam. They consider their war opponents to be enemies of their religion.

In many places, people have been enemies for more than a decade and have done a lot to each other. They have learned to hate each other. Men have joined the Taliban because relatives were killed. They want to avenge them.

Still others have become Taliban because they do not want to let foreign countries impose forms of government on them that they do not understand. Their task is now done. But their participation in a victorious peace promises personal advancement.

And so, atrocities continue to occur, teaching the people who hope for peace to fear it. They fear the signals from the Taliban leadership promising a peaceful future are a trap that exploits people's longing for peace. Once the Taliban are in power, they can rage as they did then. You can't rule that out, even though it's not likely. Once they are in power or share power, the senior Taliban will have trouble getting their supporters to act in a way that can really bring peace.

The government side has a hard time accepting the given situation. It helped the foreigners to establish a democratic system. In return, they provided them with military protection. They had settled into this constellation. Suddenly, this relationship was terminated and they were left alone without protection. Again and again, the government tries to force the former allies back into the alliance by highlighting the Taliban's atrocities. "This only happened because you abandoned us."

The government attributes all atrocities that occur to the Taliban, even if they are committed by the Islamic State or supporters of Al Qaida. The organizations in question are bitter enemies of each other, as they are of the Taliban. But such terrifying predicates draw attention to the fact that Donald Trump's intention to agree with the Taliban that Afghanistan must not again become a hotbed of Islamist terrorism was a naive illusion, and suggest that by fighting the Taliban, one is also fighting the Islamic State.

There are also reports that Punjabis, i.e. Pakistanis, are taking part in the fighting. This indicates that Pakistan is trying to secure its influence in Afghanistan. Until now, the Taliban have depended on Pakistan for weapons and money. If they win against the Afghan government or come to terms with it, they will have access to Afghan resources and will no longer need the ISI. The relationship between the Taliban and Pakistan has never been a matter of heart. After a peace agreement, Pakistan would have no means to control the Taliban and thus Afghanistan. It would need a real occupying power to do so. What the British, the Soviets and NATO have failed to achieve, Pakistan and its Punjabis will hardly be able to do. Rumors that the Afghan Da'esh are also a product of the ISI and that the Punjabis are in Afghanistan to support the Islamic State are more likely to be trusted. Pakistan has had to reckon with losing its grip on the Taliban for some time and has created the Da'esh as a replacement. The Afghan government likes to pick up on reports of Punjabis because it can use them to point out the sinister role that Pakistan and the ISI have played and are playing in Afghanistan without saying so openly.

The government and the Taliban are still negotiating in Doha with the participation of the United States and regional powers. There has been some progress. Perhaps they will come to an agreement and spare themselves a military final battle. But even in this case, there will not be immediate peace. The Taliban leaders will have trouble converting their followers to the peace they have made.

As our bureau chief Abdul Hussain put it, even in the event of final victory, "The first two months after the end of the war will be bad. But after that, things will pick up."

Dear readers, after these speculations about the Taliban, the question arises what role OFARIN might play in this presumed future. This will be the subject of the next newsletter.

Best regards,

*Peter Schwittek.*