

Schools on the Frontline

The struggle over education in the Afghan wars

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Taleban have become known in the West for their strong anti-education stance, particularly against girls' education. Reports about them burning down girls' and other schools were abundant over a period of time. This continues to echo in current descriptions of this – despite the recent emergence of local Islamic State franchises – still by far strongest insurgent movement in Afghanistan. Two problems have been widely overlooked in this context. First, a portion of the early school burnings was not committed by the Taleban – but it was easy to blame them. Second, for a number of years the Taleban have changed their policy on education. One important reason for this was popular pressure on them which forced them to understand that, if they wanted to return to rule in Afghanistan in any form, they could not do this against a population that widely values educating their sons and daughters. This chapter looks at the evolution of the Taleban's education policies and approaches since they came into being as an organisation in the mid-1990s and particularly after 2001, set into the broader context of Afghanistan's at least 100-years old conflict between modernisers and their opponents, which has led to often violent fighting over the education system.

2. EDUCATION IN AFGHANISTAN: HISTORICAL AREAS OF CONFLICTS

Afghanistan's education system – and its most important infrastructure: the schools – were, from the very beginning, a key arena of contest in the modern-

sation conflicts that shaped the country's history throughout the 20th century. Periodically, modernising governments and armed insurgent movements fought over control over – or even the existence of – schools and, later on, over influence on curricula, funding and teachers' appointments. This conflict continues to be acted out to this very day.

It started under reformer king Amanullah, who reigned from 1919 to 1929. Inspired by an elite reformist group, the *Jawanan-e Afghan* (Young Afghans), including his father-in-law and mentor Mahmud Tarzi, who became foreign minister in 1919, he embarked on implementing a wide-ranging reform programme. This reached from proclaiming civil rights for all Afghans and first elements of parliamentarianism (in the 1923 constitution, the *nezamname*) to expanding taxation, including to the landed elites (which triggered resistance), modernising the army and the administration.

Core of this reform programme was a modern education system that started to be expanded. During Amanullah's reign, government expenses for education rose by 1,000 per cent compared to under his predecessor, his father Amir Habibullah. Compulsory elementary education was enshrined in the constitution. The new Ministry for Education planned to establish at least one primary school in each district and one secondary school in each province. In 1928, some 40,000 pupils were enrolled in these schools all over the country. (This would be 100 on average per district, in today's administrative boundaries.) In Kabul, three new elite schools were established, teaching German, French and English. University-grade students were sent abroad, mainly to Turkey and Europe. In the field of vocational training, an agriculture and a medicine school were opened (from the latter, Kabul University emerged later), as well as one for governors and another for clerks and accountants. The first formal school for girls was opened in Kabul in 1921 (Karlsson/Mansory 1979: 14). In 1924, the first secondary school and in 1928, the first lyceum for girls for girls was opened. In 1928, 800 girls attended school; there was also a home economics school for women. Adult classes – for literacy but also on civic and religious subjects – were held. The King himself occasionally taught some of them. All schooling was free of charge. (Rubin 1995: 310; Gregorian 1969: 239-44; Zuri 1986: 459).

Amanullah was overthrown by a reactionary coalition of conservative Pashtun tribes, non-Pashtun minority groups and the Islamic clergy – with British support, the latter an act of revenge for Amanullah's declaration of full independence in 1919. Amanullah's successor – a former brigand who called himself Habibullah II (also known as Habibullah Kalakani, for his area of origin, Kalakan, or, derogatively, as Bacha-ye Saqao, 'the Water Carrier's Son') – revoked all of the Young Afghans' reforms. Education was his particular target: Among

his first steps were the closure of all modern schools and the abolishment of the education ministry, which he saw as an infringement on the realm of the Islamic clergy. He also closed the medical and the vocational schools, the home economics school for women and stopped co-education, which had been introduced for the 6 to 11-year olds. His fighters sacked laboratories and libraries; school books were either destroyed or auctioned off. He also banned the teaching of the ‘unbelievers’ foreign languages. The first 28 young women sent to Turkey in 1928 for higher education were recalled. (Gregorian 1969: 275).

Despite Amanullah’s overthrow, and his reform programme being labelled as ‘failed’ (e.g. see Gregorian 1969: 274; Poullada 1973: XV), he succeeded, as Poullada added, “in laying the foundations for later, more successful efforts to modernize Afghanistan.” The expanded education system, in particular, contributed to breaking open the country’s traditional social structures. The numbers of schools and students grew exponentially, although unevenly – in the western city of Herat, there was reportedly only one school (Gammell 2016: 260) –, also attracting sons of the rural elites whose education would reflect back into their original communities, lowering the urban-rural divide. It also created the social forces that became the drivers of political modernisation in the years after World War II, a modern educated class. Its members referred to themselves as *roshanfekran* (“enlightened thinkers”). Teachers were a large portion of them; by 1959, the system for teachers training established under Amanullah had produced some 2,500 alumni. This secularly educated group took over from the mullahs who so far had dominated the school system.

The leftist political forces that emerged in the early/mid-1960s, had a strong basis among the teachers, both in urban and rural areas. The *Khalq* (“People”) faction of the Soviet-backed People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)¹ that became part of the government in 1973 after then President Muhammad Daud’s coup d’état in 1973 and took over power completely by what it called the “April revolution” in 1978, was publicly dubbed the “teacher’s party.” Its 1979 short-term leader, Hafizullah Amin, had had a US degree in pedagogics and headed the Kabul *Dar-ul-Mualemin* (teachers training college) in the early 1960s (Rudersdorf 1981: 29). The same was true for some of the Maoist leftists that were part of the armed opposition to the PDPA; in the western province of Farah, famously a “teachers front” participated in the armed struggle. A number of teachers of other persuasions became local commanders of the Islamist *tan-*

1 The PDPA was renamed Hezb-e Watan (Fatherland Party) in 1990. Its leader Dr. Najibullah was in power up to 1992 when, after a short interim period, the mujahedin took over.

zims, the mujahedin ‘parties’ that became the strongest force in the armed anti-Soviet/PDPA opposition.

Figures about the literacy rate and school enrolment at that point of time differ widely in the sources. The official overall figure for 1976 had been 12 per cent (Zuri 1986: 465; Muradow 1981: 192). By 1978, the overall literacy rate was estimated at 18 per cent for men and 5 per cent for women (quoted in AIR 2006: 3) – but might in fact have been around one per cent among women. According to a contemporary Soviet source, only 14 per cent of all children attended school at the time of the 1978 PDPA takeover (quoted in Robinson/Dixon 2013: 111). Another source gave approximately 54 per cent for boys and 12 per cent for girls at the primary level and approximately 16 per cent and 4 per cent, respectively, at the secondary level. The completion rate was at approximately 0.3 per cent. Approximately 1.2 million students (18 per cent of them girls) were enrolled in all levels of the education system (quoted in AIR 2006: 3).

The PDPA regime, with Soviet support, again embarked on a top-down modernisation programme that included expanding the education system and lowering the scope of illiteracy. But early radicalism – the new regime, for example, pushed for co-education even in the conservative countryside and used the teachers’ corps as a ‘transmission belt’ for the PDPA’s policies – led to violent counter-action. That it was soon revoked did not help things anymore. A competition ensued between the Soviet-backed and -funded PDPA authorities and the mujahedin about building and destroying schools. While the government ambitiously planned to increase the number of schools to 2,795 by 1982 (Zuri 1986: 467), its mujahedin opponents made educational institutions and their personnel their target.

Of the 4,185 schools countrywide, the figure the Afghan press gave for 1978,² around 2,000 were destroyed after the ‘revolution’ (Robinson/Dixon 2013: 111), according to one Soviet source 1,000 of them in summer/autumn 1980 alone, after the Soviet invasion of December 1979, (Muradow 1981: 207). By 1983, only 860 schools were still open; by 1986, some 2,000 teachers had been killed (Robinson/Dixon 2013: 111) and by the end of the war an estimated 80 per cent of all school buildings were damaged or destroyed (AIR 2006: 3). While girls’ enrolment rose from 8 to 14 per cent between 1975 and 1985, overall enrolment dropped (Robinson/Dixon 2013: 111).

Zuri (1986: 465) added that also in the non-occupied regions of Afghanistan – i.e. those under mujahedin control – and in refugee camps in Pakistan “con-

2 According to Zuri (1986: 467-8), there were 1,812 village, 546 primary and 197 secondary schools all over Afghanistan in 1976.

tours of new schooling structures emerged”, but that on both sides of the (figurative) frontline, “the primacy of politics was evident in the education system.” The most glaring example were US financed “anti-Soviet textbooks for Afghan schoolchildren [that] encouraged a jihadist outlook” printed during the Soviet occupation – that continued to be used by the Taleban, both when they were in power and currently in schools controlled by them (Tharoor 2014). Nevertheless, NGO representatives frequently reported how the years in refugee camps changed the attitude of at least large parts of the originally conservative, anti-non-madrassa education rural population towards realising how important education was for their children, including girls. The Los Angeles Times (Tempest 1997) quoted a long-term Afghanistan activist, not only on education, Nancy Dupree.³

»"When the refugees first came to Pakistan after the 1979-80 Soviet invasion, education was anathema," said Nancy Dupree, a U.S. expert on Afghanistan who directs a research center in Peshawar. "The refugees were mainly a rural population. They looked upon education as the road on which communism came to Afghanistan. (...) But the refugee attitude toward the education of women and girls appears to have softened. (...) "Enthusiasm for girls' education has never been higher here," Dupree said. "The refugees have been exposed to the benefits."«

When the mujahedin took over power in April 1992, international support for the education system resumed. In 1993, approximately 1,000 of the 2,200 schools in the country were supported with international assistance channelled through NGOs. These schools served about 25 per cent of the estimated one million children enrolled in primary schools in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, NGOs supported the primary education of 90,000 Afghan children in refugee camps (AIR 2006: 4). But not after long, the mujahedin plunged the country into a new, violent cycle of ‘civil’, or rather factional war that inflicted further damage on the education system. Their infighting destroyed much of what had remained intact in the cities that had been under PDPA control to the end. Mujahedin militias, for example, used the books in the Kabul University library for keeping themselves warm during a particularly harsh winter during that period. By 1996, Kabul

3 The author has heard similar assessments from many sources during the 12 years he lived in Afghanistan, in the period between 1983 and the present; some information in this article derives from the large number of meetings and interviews over that time and cannot be directly attributed anymore.

had 158 public schools left with 148,000 boys and 103,000 girls attending and 11,208 teachers, of which 7,793 were women.

With the factional war on-going and Afghanistan dropping from the international agenda, external education funding plummeted from 22 per cent of all Official Development Assistance (ODA) for the country in 1993 to 0.3 per cent in 1997. This was somewhat compensated by increased funding for emergency programs that were made available in the education sector but were almost exclusively on a short-term basis (AIR 2006: 4).

3. EDUCATION UNDER THE TALIBAN REIGN

This was the situation in which the Taleban took over Kabul in that year and in most of the rest of the country by 1998. This new movement had emerged from earlier mujahedin fronts that, starting in the late 1970s, sprang up around religious schools (*madrassa* – as opposed to *maktab*, officially used for state-run schools).⁴ The *madrassa* head or a teacher would become the commanders and the pupils their foot-soldiers (Roy 1995; Zabulwal 2009: 181); the local term for *madrassa* students is *taleb* (plural: *taleban*). Often they would only join the fight during the school holidays, and return to their books as soon as school season reopened.

During the 1980s, these fronts were still part of various mujahedin *tanzim*, but they re-emerged and coalesced into a new military-political movement in the mid-1990, *De Talebano Islami Ghurdzang* (Islamic Movement of the Taleban), as a reaction to the factional war which the Taleban saw as un-Islamic. In effect a second-generation mujahedin movement (it continues to call its fighters *mujahedin*), it turned against the mother movement and, by 2001, had ended most of the factional fighting. It can be argued that, if it had not been for the terrorist attacks in the US on 11 September 2001, they might have taken over the country entirely. It was their uneasy alliance with the 9/11 perpetrators of Usama ben Laden's al-Qaeda (the Taleban were not a direct part of the 9/11 attacks) and the refusal, afterwards, to hand them over for trial, that caused their downfall later that year.

When the Taleban swept to power in an area, their commanders often used to replicate Bacha-ye Saqao's approach from 1929: they almost automatically closed down schools, particularly girls' schools. After they captured Kabul in 1996, they shut down 63 schools within three months there alone, "affecting 103,000 girls, 148,000 boys and 11,200 teachers, of whom 7,800 were women";

4 In popular language, these terms interchange.

they also temporarily shut down Kabul University. In some areas, girl schools were altered into boy schools (Najimi 1997: 6). Even if they did not close the schools, the ban for women teachers to work also affected them, as they had also taught at boy schools. “By December 1998, UNICEF reported that the country’s educational system was in a state of total collapse with nine in ten girls and two in three boys not enrolled in school” (Rashid 2000: 108). It further estimated that at that point “only 4 to 5 per cent of primary aged children g[ot] a broad based schooling, and for secondary and higher education the picture is even bleaker” (Clark 2000).

This was part of the Taleban’s policy of pushing women and girls out of public life, part of what they understood as a ‘pure Islamic society’. Officially, the Taleban leaders maintained that they were not against education, even of girls, in principle, referring to the Quranic saying that one should “even go as far as China” in order to obtain knowledge. They claimed that the bad security situation, with the on-going war with the remnants of the mujahedin’s Northern Alliance, and the lack of funds forced them to this approach; when security was reinstated, they promised, schools would reopen. This argument was formalised in a 1999 decree by Mullah Muhammad Omar, the Taleban’s founder-leader. The Taleban never officially said that they were against girls’ education in general, although many in their ranks believed exactly that – reflecting more widespread beliefs in the conservative sectors of the rural population from which the leadership of their movement sprang. The decree was not lifted until the end of the Taleban rule, but it also was never fully enforced; there was what one UN official at the time called “implementation fatigue” – the Taleban had simply issued too many decrees to enforce all of them.

That left space for pragmatism. Taleban officials, up to government level, discussed with, listened and sometimes even reacted positively to arguments of those UN agencies and non-governmental organisations that were instrumental in keeping up some semblance of an education system. Or to local communities, for that matter, who wanted to keep up schooling. In some areas of the country, Taleban officials tolerated and even protected schools, including girls’ schools, against those superiors who were on the Taleban ‘party line’. (For example, they warned teachers and pupils of unofficial schools to stay home when inspections were announced.) There also were those who, in personal conversations, openly disagreed with other key elements of the official Taleban policy, ranging from its exclusion of women from professional life to the Taleban alliance with al-Qaeda. Michael Keating, a later deputy UN special envoy to Afghanistan, wrote in 1998 (139) “Where female education is locally valued, it is permitted”.

The Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) was one, if not the largest NGO active during that period. It successfully negotiated a protocol with the Taleban Ministry of Education to run village and home schools in various provinces (Siddique 2012). A 1997 survey counted “422 boys’ schools, 125 girls’ schools and 87 co-education [mixed schools] in form of primary schools and home-schools” in at least ten provinces (Najimi 1997: 3, 5). SCA regional director Ulla Asberg told the author in 2000 that the SCA-supported schools had around 200,000 pupils, 37,000 of them girls (Heller 2000).

The NGOs also paid the teachers and provided the textbooks. In the girls’ schools, the female teachers who had officially been laid off by the Taleban were the staff in most cases. The curriculum consisted of a mixture of the Taleban guidelines, with extended religious instruction, and additional elements provided by the NGOs, including ‘modern’ subjects. Girls in the villages used to “wear their pens in their shirt pockets, to show off the fact they go to school” (Clark 2000). Former SCA head Anders Fange told a media outlet later on (Siddique 2012).

»Most of the Taliban, even the ministers we dealt with in Kabul, had a pretty pragmatic view,” he says. “Somehow it was understood that they needed this humanitarian assistance of which we were one of the providers.” [...] “When we finalized these negotiations, [minister Amir Khan Mutaqi] told me, ‘We know you have these girls’ schools. We know it, but don’t tell us,’ he said.«

This continued on the local level, as Asberg explained, showing the practical authority the subnational administration enjoyed:

»Everything depends on the director for education in the particular district. If he is very conservative, this can become a problem. For example, three girls’ schools were just closed in Laghman province. In such cases I visit the provincial governor and threaten to close the boys’ schools in the district, too. They don’t want, so this approach helps most of the time to keep the girls’ schools open.«

The German NGO COFAA – supported by an alliance of various national Caritas chapters – also ran a school programme under the Taleban, in madrassas mainly in Kabul and in agreement with the Taleban’s Ministry of Religious Affairs. (Teaching in those mosque-related schools did not fall under the responsibility of the education ministry.) It expanded to 15 madrassas with around 10,000 pupils, half of them girls. Over the time, a teachers’ training programme was added (Schwittek 2011: 25-6, 32-3). These schools, however, ended after

grade six.⁵ By the fall of the Taliban regime in December 2001, an estimated 500,000 boys and girls were in schools receiving educational assistance from NGOs (AIR 2006: 2, 6)

Less officially, a number of Afghan women – among them teachers who were banned by the Taliban from working – ran so-called home schools, some for girls, some mixed. One of them, Soraya Parluka, a former PDPA official who had chosen not to flee the country, was one of Time magazine’s 2001 women of the year for that activity (Lafferty 2001). Some of those schools received some NGO support, others did not.

These arrangements were rather volatile, though. As most local Taliban officials were exchanged after six months under those days’ rotational system, the NGOs’ struggle started anew with each newly appointed official. Even the minister’s green light was sometimes not sufficient. Both Fange and Schwittek reported how individual mullahs tried to interfere, or how disagreement in or between Taliban ministries or the Taliban cabinet in Kabul and the movement’s leadership in Kandahar surfaced frequently. Schwittek mentioned how the minister told him not to hand out pencils and exercise books to girls anymore as it was not necessary for them to learn how to write. An investigation commission was sent to the schools, but after a girl had written a religious text on the blackboard in its presence, the report to Taliban leader Mullah Muhammad Omar resulted in him recommending to expand the programme countrywide – “but no one had money for that” (Schwittek 2011: 28). All schools went on with an unaltered curriculum, and continued to operate after the Taliban regime fell in 2001.

In 2000, towards the end of the Taliban regime, after al-Qaida’s first terrorist attacks in East Africa and amidst mounting pressure on them for human rights abuses, the Taliban cracked down on the strong role of NGOs in Afghan schools (but not in the mosque schools). Mullah Omar issued another decree to stop their involvement but the Taliban were unable to fully implement it. Also the schools under government control and higher education were subjected to tighter regulation. Religious studies were extended. In primary schools, the Arabic lan-

5 Other NGOs involved in school programmes during the Taliban regime were the USAID-funded Education Center of Afghanistan at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (ECA/UNO) that supported approximately 630 schools, Muslim Aid that supported 271 schools as well as the Afghan Development Agency (ADA), Franco-Afghan Friendship Association (AFRANE), Médecins Sans Frontières (54 schools), the Norwegian Committee for Afghanistan (42 schools), and the Islamic Relief Agency (18 schools) (AIR 2006: 2, 6).

guage was introduced starting from grade four (leading to much desperation among pupils) while ‘un-Islamic’ subjects such as Arts and Music were abolished and history and geography were only taught starting in grade seven. Pupils had to wear white turbans, university students black ones. At universities, students had to attend religious lectures four times a week between 7 and 8am. The mullahs hired as teachers for that received double the pay the best-paid university professors did. In the first days after the decree was issued, a lot of students were visible in the streets, excluded from their lectures. University degrees obtained at foreign universities were no longer recognised (Heller 2001).

4. THE RAPID EXPANSION OF EDUCATION AFTER THE TALEBAN REGIME

The period after the overthrow of the Taleban regime in 2001 by an US-led-intervention, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks committed by al-Qaeda sheltered by Taleban protection in Afghanistan, saw a renewal of the competition for control over the education system. The new Afghan government – a coalition of parts of the former monarchy’s elite, including head of state Hamed Karzai, and anti-Taleban warlords – tried to reconstruct the Afghan education system with the help of the international community. This conformed to the wishes of large parts of the population. For the government, showing that it ran a functioning and expanding education system became a matter of prestige and legitimacy as well as a main factor in attracting additional funding, for all the downside effects the latter would involve.

The government capacity and capability to make this effort a success, however, was insufficient. There was over-administration, political infighting, haggling over access to jobs and resources and growing large-scale corruption.

A large number of teachers dismissed by the Taleban who wanted to return to their previous jobs and had offered themselves to the UN in 2001/02 but had not been linked to the mujahedin were blocked by the former anti-Taleban forces who brought in their own personnel. The Minister of Education in the 2002-04 Afghan Transitional Administration, Yunos Qanuni, was not an education specialist either. Initially he was not interested in the job, as he felt he had been ‘demoted’ from his previous post as head of the interior ministry, with its control over the police; he was known for his high absence rates from his office (Schwitek 2011: 50). This changed with the campaigns for the 2004 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections in which both Qanuni, a key leader of the mujahedin party Jamiat-e Islami ran himself. He used the teachers’ corps that was largely loyal to him by then as a mobilisation force; most of the polling stations were

in schools, and teachers were manning them as a key part of the election personnel. Qanuni was defeated by Karzai in 2004, but he was elected into parliament one year later and became the speaker of the Wolesi Jirga, (“House of the People”, its lower house).

Karzai quickly understood the political importance of schools and teachers and put his own loyalists at the top of the ministry. Nur Muhammad Qarqin (2004-06), who had been Karzai’s 2004 election campaign manager, succeeded Qanuni as the education minister. He was followed by Muhammad Hanif Atmar (2006-08) and Muhammad Faruq Wardak (2008-15) who had both made a name for themselves as NGO managers during the Taleban regime and became key figures in the Karzai government. Atmar continues to serve as current president Ashraf Ghani’s National Security Advisor as of early 2017.

Particularly during Karzai’s second presidential term, from 2009 to 2014, corruption became endemic in the education system. USAID alone, as the biggest donor, spent 883 million US dollars from 2001 till December 2016 (SIGAR 2017: 178)⁶ with additional millions going into teachers’ salaries. According to UNESCO, the Afghan education system had expanded to 14,600 government-run general education schools by 2013 – 41 per cent of them (6,056) primary schools only, 27 per cent (3,918) lower secondary schools including all primary grades and 32 per cent (4,625) upper secondary schools containing all three levels. In May 2016, the MoE reported this had further grown to 15,249 general education schools with 184,024 teachers and almost 8.7 million students enrolled. A 2015 report by a joint Afghan-international anti-corruption body, however, estimated that in the government’s main education programme – the World Bank-supervised EQUIP programme which was worth 750 million US dollars at that time – 30 to 40 per cent of funds were “misused, schools are poorly constructed and students receive inadequate education.”

One of the most common ways to skim off education money are the so-called ‘ghost schools’ and ‘ghost teachers’ – schools and teachers that do not exist but are on the ministry’s payroll and receive budgets and salaries. This money is pocketed by corrupt provincial and local officials who – according to how the Afghan government’s parallel systems works, with its official institutions and unofficial, but more powerful networks – often share it with their political protectors on the national level. Although this is difficult to prove, the practice is widely known to donors, also from other ministries – there are also ‘ghost’ po-

6 Of course, the total sum does not say how much of this money stayed in Afghanistan, as there must have been a lot of fees for surveys, consultancies and foreign experts.

licemen, soldiers and even vaccinators. This practice is exacerbated by the deteriorating security situation that made checking the proper operation not only of educational institutions more difficult for both the government and donors.

In early June 2013, research by the Afghanistan Analysts Network (AAN) found only five teachers and about 20 students in a school not far outside the provincial capital of Ghor in the west of the country where 13 teachers and 767 students – 494 boys and 273 girls – were supposed to be. Ghor officials proved generally unable to say how many schools in their lawless province (with an annual education budget of approximately 5.8 million US dollars in 2012) were closed at that time – their estimates were as high as 50 per cent, blaming security issues. According to government data, Ghor’s literacy rate was just under half of the official national average of 33 per cent. Girls and young women suffered particularly: In the district of Dolina, the authorities were unable to find three women that met the educational requirements for a two-year midwifery training course (Ali 2013).

Other forms of corruption include teachers taking unofficial school fees (although schooling is officially free of charge from grade 1 to grade 9), money for making pupils pass exams, or appropriating occasional UN or NGO aid for children intended to be incentives for attending school, such as wheat, cooking oil or high nutrition cookies. Local power holders or pro-government illegal armed groups establish control over existing local schools by force, or over new ones, indirectly by providing the land on which they are built. Teachers’ positions are ‘sold’ by ministerial staff (Afghanistan is very centralised and appointments are decided on by the central authorities).

Meanwhile, Afghan teachers’ salaries remain among the lowest of civil servants in the country, ranging from 6,500 Afghani (around 110 US dollars) to 13,500 Afghani (around 225 US dollars) (Roehrs/Suroush 2015). On top of this, salaries are chronically paid late. This, among other problems, has led to recurrent teachers strikes, both on the local and the national level. In summer 2015, a strike that started in Kabul spread across 18 other provinces with teachers in Kabul demanding the implementation of campaign pledges by the Ghani/Abdullah government on salary rises and support for the improvement of housing (Roehrs/Suroush 2015).⁷

7 In a speech on National Teacher’s Day in Kabul on 15 October 2014, President Ashraf Ghani had promised, among other things, the establishment of a special commission that would remove provisions in the Civil Servant Law that treat teachers differently from other civil servants and ordered “each provincial governor“ to give a plot of land “to every teacher within six months“.

As a consequence of this situation, the Ministry of Education ended up among the top-three corrupt institutions in the country in the last two biannual National Corruption Surveys conducted by Kabul-based Integrity Watch Afghanistan in 2014 and 2016 – in an environment that was generally described, in the 2016 report, as characterised by a “devastating [and] increasing [...] level of corruption”, with the estimated nation-wide amount paid in bribes doubling since 2014 (IWA 2012: 39; IWA 2014: 23; IWA 2016; introduction, 30).

Corruption expands into the higher education system, particularly through the bribes and heavy political and personal interference in the annual centralised university entry exams, locally known as the *kankur* (from French: *concourse*) (Ali 2015).

4.1: Data insecurity

During that time, the government also started to spread apparently inflated figures on students and schools. This is not too difficult in a situation where there are contradictory figures about almost all basic facts related to education. In March 2014 (Pajhwok 2014), Karzai said at the start of the new academic year, in the presence of minister Wardak, that 11.5 million Afghan children were enrolled in schools and only 1.5 million remained out of school. Wardak added that 4.7 million of the school students were girls.

The Economist (2016) quoted President Ghani as saying that when his government took over that

»[t]here were three databases in the Ministry of Education: one for teachers, one for salaries, one for schools... they weren't talking to each other.«

But even under his tenure, the Ministry of Education (MoE) continued to publish highly inconsistent figures. For example, AAN (Roehrs/Suroush 2015) found in 2015 that

»[a]ccording to the Ministry of Education's website, in 2014 Afghanistan had 201,726 teachers – 137,822 men and 63,904 women (such figures, as always, have to be taken with a pinch of salt with, for example, the 2014 ministry Report on the Achievements of the Past 12 Years stating that Afghanistan currently employed 217,000 teachers. Other, internal, donor reports AAN has seen are doubting the ballpark altogether).«

In contrast, the MoE's annual report for 2014 stated a total number of teachers of 203,148, “including 31 per cent females” (quoted in Adili 2017). The MoE's Education for All report published in 2015 – but with ‘latest’ data from 2013 – has even two different total figures for the number of teachers in the

country: 187,000 in the minister's foreword and 131,000 in the text (MoE/EFA 2015: 2, 85). An investigation into allegations of corruption within the MoE ordered by President Ashraf Ghani in summer 2015 found, according to reports leaked to Afghan media, „hundreds of ‘ghost’ schools [...], thousands of ‘ghost’ teachers on official rolls, ‘ghost’ training seminars, and discrepancies in student enrollment and attendance records” (MEC 2015: 3; SIGAR 2016: 5).

Donor countries, too, were not particularly interested in questioning the obviously inflated Afghan figures. On the contrary, these ever-growing figures regularly made it into government progress reports and politicians speeches. When the acting Minister of Education⁸ Assadullah Hanif Balkhi accused the previous Karzai government of having “fabricated” the number of 11 million children attending school December 2016, this created some attention. He stated that a total of nine million children were registered at the country's 17,000 schools, but that only up to six million children were regularly attending school. Former deputy minister Sadiq Patman confirmed manipulations by the ministry's leadership (Shaheed 2016), and deputy education minister Assadullah Mohaqiq told the upper house of parliament on 1 January 2017 that more than 1,000 schools across the country were closed because of security issues (SIGAR 2017: 178) But other officials continued to defend the inflated figures of the Karzai era. On 3 January 2017, Kabir Haqmal, the head of the MoE information department told AAN (Adili 2017) that “[c]urrently, we have 9.2 million pupils enrolled. Out of these, between 22 and 24 per cent are permanently absent. But according to the regulations, we cannot remove them from the enrolment for up to three years.” Karzai's and Wardak's figures, he added, were not incorrect; there were indeed 11.5 million children attending schools because this included one million in Pakistan and Iran, between 1.0 to 1.2 “in informal classes” – a reference to the community-based education programmes – and 500,000 in literacy courses. The Afghan government has started new investigations.

4.2: Problems of teacher's qualifications, gender inequality and the revival of NGOs

Apart from these debates, the Afghan education system remains plagued by a number of further serious problems. This includes a lack of effective use of resources available, while international support for the Afghan education system is dropping in general, demographic issues, a still glaring gender imbalance and a

8 Acting because he had lost a vote of confidence in parliament but the president kept him in the cabinet.

growing teacher-student ratio – plus the deteriorating security situation that impacts on access and attendance. A fact sheet compiled by ACBAR (2016), a coordinating body of many Afghan and international NGOs working in the country for the international Afghanistan conference held in Brussels in October 2016, summarised:

»Afghanistan has the highest illiteracy rate in the region and worldwide, yet currently in Afghanistan, only 3.7% of GDP is being spent on education. [...] Although the expenditure in the education sector has increased from 32.8 billion Afs (\$492 million) to 44.4 billion Afs (\$666 million) over the period of 2011-2015, the Ministry of Education is still struggling to provide basic educational needs for children (...) In 2015, 14.1% of total government expenditure (excluding debt service), 15.5% of government recurrent expenditure, 10.3% of development expenditure and 3.7% of GDP was spent on the education sector [...]. UNESCO recommends that at least 6% of Afghanistan's GDP should be spent on education. [...]

According to UNAMA's recent report, increasing violence, threats and intimidation in 2015 left 103,940 Afghan children without access to education and there is a rising trend in violence against education [leading to] low attendance of primary school age children in rural areas. According to the latest Education Sector Analysis, in urban areas 78 percent of children go to school, while in rural areas only 50 percent of primary school-age children go to school. [...] The majority of the dropouts are female students. Overall one million students are considered permanently absent. [...] Over the past three years, overall expenditure in the education sector in Afghanistan has increased, but spending has significantly decreased in adult literacy programs. According to the National Literacy Department there was a 35% decrease in spending on literacy programs in 2015. [...]

The current teacher-student ratio in Afghanistan is 45:1 [...] The current percentage of female teachers is 33% and very few of those are in rural areas [...].⁹

This puts the country at 16th from the bottom of 190 countries listed by UNESCO in 2011. And according to the Ministry of Education's new Strategic Plan for 2014-18, this ratio is projected to become even more unfavourable, dropping to 1:54 students by 2020. In any case, the teacher-student ratio indicates that there is a serious lack of qualified teachers. In 2011, the Ministry of Education reported that countrywide "68 per cent of general education teachers" did "not meet standard qualifications for trained professional teachers"

⁹ As is the case with most of Afghan statistics, there are other figures in other official sources. Afghanistan's national student-teacher ratio, for example, has also been given as up to 64:1 in 2013.

(Roehrs/Suroush 2015). By October 2016, according to the World Bank, this had improved to 55 per cent (SIGAR 2017: 177).¹⁰

The galloping deterioration in the teacher-student ratio is mostly due to the rapid growth of the basic education sector in a country with a very young population and where first grade classes tend to be large and are growing. The number of school graduates rose by 36 per cent in 2012, by 59 per cent in 2013 and by 36 per cent in 2014. Almost all of them attempt to get enrolled in the universities, further increasing the pressure on the *kankur* examinations. Between 2002 and 2013, the number of students at all Afghan universities quadrupled, from 31,203 to 123,524 – not only burdening the existing capacity but also the quality of the teaching.

The pressure on primary and secondary education leads to the system “cannibalising” itself (Roehrs/Suroush 2015) – and it can be assumed that the same is the case in higher education:

»An international expert told AAN [...]: “The demand for education is growing much faster than the budget, and the pressure is so high to get new teachers that the ministry stops spending money on other things, such as maintenance of school buildings or teaching materials. Salaries today already make up more than 91 per cent of the ministry’s operational budget. This is very unusual, compared to other ministries, and the number is likely to grow further.«

The lack of teachers, and particularly female ones, particularly affects girls’ education. There were no qualified female teachers in 230 districts (of around 400)¹¹

10 Afghanistan’s vocational education system is facing the same problem. According to an international expert working in the field, from a sample of 298 teachers from the country’s 297 vocational training schools 85 per cent failed a test in 2016 that consisted of subjects supposed to be taught by them in the first grade.

11 Even the number of Afghanistan’s districts is unclear: figures given by official Afghan sources are 398 (Afghanistan Central Statistics Office 2013 and the UN mapping service AIMS 2010), 399 (2010 Afghan electoral data), 407 (US SIGAR 2016), 412 (Ministry of Education/UNESCO 2010) or 416 (Ministry of Education 2013). The current official figures cannot be verified as most of the Afghan government related websites were hacked in early 2017 and continue to be inaccessible, including those of the Central Statistics Office and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. One reason for the differences between the figures is that different governments created new districts but successor governments did not recognise these measures. As a result, there is a number of “inofficial” districts.

in 2014 (Roehrs/Suroush 2015). As a result, fewer girls are allowed to attend school due to a shortage of female teachers (ACBAR 2016). After grade six, according to different sources again, between 70 and 82 per cent of all girls that start attending school drop out – the total drop-out figure for all children is 68 per cent. Only 17 per cent of the girls reach grade nine (total: 31 per cent, while 18 per cent of all pupils reach grade 12. A 2011 government report gave more positive figures about the general gender parity, with 0.74 (74 girls per every 100 boys) for the primary schools, dropping to 0.49 on the secondary level (Ali 2013; Roehrs/Suroush 2015).¹² In almost half of all districts, there was no secondary school for girls; in 166 districts, there was not a single female teacher.

As another consequence of Afghanistan's ineffective education system – and in a revival of pre-2001 practices –, NGO-supported schools continue to play an important role, as they fill gaps in areas of the country where the government is incapable or unwilling to run schools. In 2012, SCA again supported 467 schools in rural areas, attended by approximately 120,000 students, 56 per cent of whom were girls (Fange, quoted in Rubin/Rudelforth 2016: 10). Also Ofarin – a successor to COFAA – continues to work in this field, offering “elementary schooling” in mosques and private houses “for children, women and young girls” as well as pre-school education in three provinces. This covered 8,500 pupils in the former and 500 pupils in the latter programme by early 2017 (Trofimov 2012; Schwittek 2017). At the same time, they continue to face bureaucratic hurdles like non-payment of teachers by the government.

Last but not least, by 2016 half of all Afghan schools did not have a building (SIGAR 2017: 177). Children were taught instead in tents or in the open, under trees or in some other shadow.

5. THE TALEBAN'S CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS EDUCATION

Immediately after the overthrow of the Taleban regime in 2001, the education sector – as all other sectors – grew relatively uninhibited, as the Taleban were in disarray and only present or active in a few parts of Afghanistan. Starting in 2005/06, they reorganised in ever expanding parts of the country, stepped up their military activities and expanded their areas of operation. Between 2008 and 2010, they also expanded into the Afghan north and northeast, areas where they

12 The imbalance is even stronger in Southern Afghanistan (0.47 for primary and 0.16 for secondary education), as among children living in the poorest households (0.62 for primary and 0.23 for secondary education) and in rural areas (0.69 for primary and 0.39 for secondary education).

had had difficulties consolidating their influence even when in power up to 2001 (Ruttig 2010b: 6-7; Giustozzi/Reuter 2011: 1).

The Taleban's policy on education and vis-à-vis government-run schools changed relatively drastically over the period between 2001 and 2016 – and also compared with the time they were in power between 1996 and 2001. The phase of their reorganisation and expansion was followed by one in which the Taleban specifically targeted schools as a symbol of the influence in the government they were fighting; as the International Crisis Group wrote in 2006, schools were “often the only sign of government presence in rural areas”. This was official Taleban policy, as laid out in their first *layha* (code of conduct) published in May 2006 and handed out “patchily” in pocket book format to commanders and fighters. The *layha* was probably the first printed policy document of the post-2001 Taleban (Clark 2011: 6). In its clauses 24-26, it stipulated:

- » (24) It is forbidden to work as a teacher under the current puppet regime, because this strengthens the system of the infidels. True Muslims should apply to study with a religiously trained teacher and study in a mosque or similar institution. Textbooks must come from the period of the jihad or the Taleban [regime].
- (25) Anyone who works as a teacher for the current puppet regime must receive a warning. If he nevertheless refuses to give up his job, he must be beaten. If the teacher still continues to instruct contrary to the principles of Islam, the district commander or a group leader must kill him.
- (26) Those NGOs that come to the country under the rule of the infidels must be treated as the government is treated. They have come under the guise of helping people but in fact are part of the regime. Thus, we tolerate none of their activities, whether it be building of streets, bridges, clinics, schools, madrassas (schools for religious studies) or other works. If a school fails to heed a warning to close, it must be burned. But all religious books must be secured beforehand.«

(Not all NGOs were targets, though. Local Taleban commanders who wanted to cooperate with one were allowed to do so, but needed a permission by the Taleban's Rahbari Shura, the “Leadership Council”, so the *layha*'s Art. 8.)

First reports about teachers and students being intimidated not to attend state-run schools emerged in 2002 (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 4) and of schools being burned down in 2004. Gopal (2010: 37) reported from Kandahar that attacks in this province began to intensify by 2005 and that, by 2009, “most of the schools operating outside firmly-held government territory had been shuttered”.

But, as Giustozzi/Franco (2011: 1) found, “[v]iolence against schools started with a variety of conservative actors”, and the Taleban adopting it as one of the

main manifestations of their campaign against the new regime. In such an environment, it was easy to blame attacks on schools on the Taleban, even if other actors were responsible. (The same was the case with assassinations of political leaders.) Over the period from 2006 (when the first *layha* was published) to 2008 such reports became abundant – despite rural communities showing “little support for the violent campaign” and the Taleban facing “a backlash from villagers who wanted their children to be given the opportunity to attend school” (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 1). According to Ministry of Education figures, attacks on schools rose country-wide from 47 in 2004 to 123 (in 15 provinces) in 2005 and 202 attacks in 27 provinces, with 41 students, teachers and support staff killed between January and July 2006. “208 schools were closed in Zabul, Helmand, Kandahar, Ghazni, Khost and Paktika between April and July 2006” – i.e. mainly in the insurgency strongholds in southern and south-eastern Afghanistan (ICG 2006: 6-7). A CARE report published in 2010 for UNESCO described how this “alarming” trend continued to 2008 (UNESCO/CARE 2010: 173-7):

»Between January 2006 and December 2008, 1,153 attacks on education targets were reported, including the damaging or destruction of schools by arson, grenades, mines and rockets; threats to teachers and officials delivered by “night letters” [printed or handwritten leaflets distributed by the Taleban] or verbally; the killing of students, teachers and other education staff; and looting. The number of incidents stayed stable at 241 and 242 respectively in 2006 and 2007, but then almost tripled to 670 in 2008. In 2006 and 2007, 230 people died from attacks on schools, students and education personnel, according to Ministry of Education (MoE) figures. (...) From 1 January 2009 to 30 June 2009, 123 schools were targeted by insurgents and 51 received threats, according to [...] UNICEF. At least 60 students and teachers were killed and 204 wounded in security incidents in the same period. [...] In July 2009, more than 400 schools, mostly in the volatile south, remained closed due to insecurity, the MoE said.«

Another CARE report (Glad 2009: 3) concluded that girls’ schools were more often targeted than boys’ schools: “Of all attacked schools, girls’ schools account for 40%, while mixed schools (32%) and boys’ schools (28%) make up for the rest.” But it also acknowledged that both the Taleban and “internal community members” were “the main perpetrators against the education of girls”. By October 2009, the Ministry of Education acknowledged that altogether 800 schools were closed in the areas most affected by the insurgency, “and even that might have been an underestimat[ion] of the extent of the problem” (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 4).

After the Taliban's countrywide reorganisation phase (2006-09), they further consolidated their control over an increasing part of the country and broadened their parallel government structures. The war spread to all of Afghanistan again, although in different intensities. Since the withdrawal of most of the international forces – of up to 140,000 in 2011) some areas saw a transition from guerrilla warfare to more fixed front lines, with the Taliban increasingly operating in larger formations and simultaneously carrying out offensive operation in several provinces. In the early fall of 2015 the Taliban took over the city of Kunduz for two weeks, the first provincial capital they captured since they fell from power in 2001. Almost simultaneously, they stormed the headquarters of the Afghan intelligence service in the city of Ghazni and got hold of its complete archive (Muzhary 2016). They almost captured Kunduz again in October 2016 (Ali 2016) and advanced significantly in both years, particularly in the provinces of Helmand, Faryab, Badakhshan, Takhar, Baghlan, Ghazni, Farah and Sarepul. Obama's 2016 switch back to more close air support for Afghan forces, drone attacks and special forces involvement has reversed this trend only in parts.

Neither the government's claim that it continues to hold all 34 provincial centres and all of about 400 districts – except eight, according to its own statements –, nor the latest percentages provided by several institutions about government versus Taliban control sufficiently describe the situation of the widespread Taliban control and influence. The Special Inspector of the [US] Government on Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR 2017: 89-91) warned that by November 2016 the government only controlled only “57.2 per cent of the districts [...], 6.2 per cent less than in late August that year” and 15 per cent less than a year earlier. 233 were in the hands of the government, 41 in those of the Taliban and 133 “contested”, with almost one third of the Afghan population. Control over “districts”, though, statistically means who controls the district *centre*. It can be assumed that the Taliban even control significant if not the largest part of the territory of those districts labelled as ‘government-held’. This is shown, for example, in the preamble to the Corruption Survey 2016, published in December that year by the Afghan NGO Integrity Watch Afghanistan where it explained its researchers' access to the districts (IWA 2016: 1):

»IWA conducted a security assessment, and determined that, out of 398 districts in Afghanistan, 98 were too dangerous to allow for enumerators to travel. In another 100, enumerators were limited to the district center. In 109, enumerators were able to travel within a two-hour radius of the district center, but not to more remote areas. It was only in 91 districts — less than 23% of the country — that IWA-trained enumerators had a free rein.«

As a result, Afghanistan roughly divides into the three ‘zones’: government-controlled areas, Taleban-controlled areas and contested areas. These ‘zones’ are not compact territories – on the contrary, the many ‘front lines’ are extremely fluid. In the scattered areas of the contested ‘zone’, schools remain targets in the military confrontation. The Taleban’s parallel government structures also cover those wider areas not fully under government control and even extend into those. (For example, businesses, landowners and government officials are often taxed by them.)

In this environment that emerged after the Taleban’s reorganisation phase, its attitude towards the education system changed again. Operating now from a consolidated territorial base inside Afghanistan (apart from its safe havens in Pakistan), the Taleban dropped their attitude, getting away from a full-scale onslaught on state-run education and instead trying to achieve partial control over it. This could be done in two ways: taking control over government-run (and also, to a smaller extent, private) schools; or building up Taleban-run schools. Over the years, and up until this paper was finished, the first way had gained precedence by far.

By 2012, the Taleban had drafted a new pro-education policy. In the preamble to the 6-page document,¹³ it says that “understanding the sacred Islamic disciplines and modern educational concepts are greatly needed”. It speaks about six forms of institutions that are to compose the Emirate’s educational system: “schools, village day madrassas, boarding madrassas, dar ul-hafez (schools to learn the Quran), university and specialised religious institution [singulars in the original]”, with a “priority” on the village day madrassas. The day madrassas are intended for girls and will teach “some history and geography”. It is not spelled out whether “schools” refers to Taleban-created ones or those co-opted from the government. In themselves, however, they consist of three stages: elementary, intermediate and secondary. Nor is it explicitly said whether they will include boys and girls, the term used is “children”. Furthermore, the document sets up an “academic council” under the “High Commission for Education and Training” (similar to a ministry, under the Taleban Leadership Council) to work out curricula. For the schools, it is to include, among others, natural sciences, English and Arabic language, besides the two national languages Dari and Pashto, and “knowledge on computers”. “Improper subjects” such as “anti-Jihad subjects [and] about Muslim women’s improper liberation [...] will not have a chance to

13 An English translation of the document is in the author’s archive. It is titled: Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, “Purposed Law for Education and Training”, not dated.

be taught”. Private initiative to establish educational institutions is encouraged, but they need to obtain a permission from the High Commission. The Taleban explicitly do not strive to set up their own universities but state that they want to gain control over the existing ones.

This policy document is a mixture of openness and conservatism, reflected both by content and wording. But it reflects the slow but steady progress in the Taleban leadership’s thinking about access to education. Taleban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada – who is widely portrayed as an ultra-conservative – is believed to have had a key role in drafting this document.

As a result, schools often continue to run in the Taleban ‘control zone’, – but there also seem to be areas where this is not the case, particularly in very conservative areas in the south and southeast, for example in northern Helmand and parts of Kandahar, Zabul and Paktika. This reflects their self-projection as the still legitimate government that, in their view, had been illegally replaced by an outside intervention in 2001; this coincided with them calling themselves officially not the Islamic Movement of the Taleban anymore, but the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, the title use when they were in power from 1996 to 2001. It also makes them more accessible for communities that are interested in continuing education for their children.

In January of the same year, the Taleban announced that they would open their own schools providing “Islamic education” for boys and ‘later’ for girls in areas under their control. Funding of one million US dollars was allocated for this purpose, including to reprint textbooks from the Taleban Emirate period in the 1990s. Ten schools were initially planned in ten districts in six provinces in the south of the country, the Taleban’s stronghold: Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, Helmand, Nimroz and Farah. On the one hand, this demonstrated not only the Taleban’s increased strength and consistent hold of some territory but their willingness to carry out state functions. On the other hand, the low numbers of schools initially planned also demonstrated that the Taleban were not capable of setting up their own education system. It is not clear either whether this plan was ever implemented.

This lack of capacity apparently made the Taleban choose the other option: capturing state schools. (The Taleban also started co-opting private schools in some areas. Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 21) As the government was also interested to keep at least a foothold in Taleban-controlled or contested areas, according to Giustozzi/Franco (2011: 2, 8), the Ministry of Education (MoE) established first contacts with the Taleban leadership in order to come to an agreement over the practicalities of keeping schools open in such areas in 2007. They were, however, quickly “cut off, allegedly because of American hostility to them”.

As a way around this problem and in order to not fully lose control, the government entered into unwritten agreements with the Taleban about keeping schools running through local elders or religious figures acting on its behalf. (Some did so independently of the government.) In 2007, the MoE started funding NGOs to provide education in private homes and other community settings in areas influenced or controlled by the armed insurgents, based on an official MoE curriculum. This so-called community-based education (CBE) became “a feature of the education landscape in Afghanistan, [...] widely accepted by the Taliban“ and “has led to higher enrolment [...] through dialogue with the Taliban and other armed groups“ (Rubin/Rudeworth 2016: 7). In order to prevent the Taleban from taking full control over the schools, the Ministry of Education set up local school protection or management *shuras* (traditional councils) to protect the schools, ostensibly establishing community control. By early 2007, it was already claiming that *shuras* existed in half of the country’s 9,000 schools and, by 2011, that there were 8,000 such *shuras* countrywide (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 9) But a 2009 field study in eight provinces suggested that there was “no difference in the rate of attacks between those schools where mechanisms for community involvement are in place and where they are not” (Glad 2009: 46). The Ministry of Education also says it recruited 3,000 mullahs to teach literacy classes and claims that, by appointing mullahs for this purpose, as a result they do not oppose female education (Reid 2012).

Nor is the education sector is the only sector where both sides do cooperate. The author observed, for example in Gardez in south-eastern Afghanistan in 2010, that local Taleban also keep contact to local hospitals, health workers and midwives – to treat their own family members. As one local doctor said: “Taleban have wives, too.” This also demonstrates that, similar to the education sector, the Taleban are unable to run their own health system. (This is unlike earlier guerrilla movements in other parts in the world.)

6. THE SURGE AND THE (UNPRECEDENTED) CONSEQUENCES

The presidential election year of 2009 turned out to become crucial for the Afghan education system, as it led to a drastic change in Taleban education policy. They still continued to attack schools in the run-up to the election. At least 26 schools were attacked and partially damaged by the Taleban on election day, 20 August 2009, according to the MoE, because they were being used as polling stations (UNESCO/CARE 2010: 173-7). But a change in international politics led to the Afghan government reaching out to the Taleban again. In the US, President Barack Obama had made the withdrawal of his country’s troops by the end

of his second tenure (in early 2017) one of his central campaign issues. At the same time, his campaign teams increased the criticism of the systemic corruption under the Karzai government and started looking for an alternative candidate to support instead of Karzai. This idea was finally dropped, but the damage was done in the Afghan-US relations and led Karzai to start a new outreach to the Taliban, while insisting that no other party – including the US or the UN – should do so.

At the same time, the Obama administration started what became known as the “surge”, a heavy increase of US troops in order to destroy or at least weaken the Taliban – in US counter-insurgency language, to “decapitate” and “degrade” them. The surge was announced in December 2009 and started in 2010. The Taliban answered with an escalation, too, described as asymmetrical warfare, increasing the use of terrorist means – suicide attacks, car bombs, IEDs and targeted assassinations of government personnel, both in the centres and the rural areas, and expanding the guerrilla war in the countryside. UNAMA, in its annual civilian casualties report for 2011, attributed 77 per cent of all killed civilians to the Taliban. In more detail, it reported “The civilian death toll from suicide attacks in Afghanistan rose dramatically in 2011 to 450 [...], an increase of 80 percent over 2010 [...], the nature of these attacks changed, becoming more complex, sometimes involving multiple bombers, and designed to yield greater numbers of dead and injured civilians. [...] Targeted killings of civilians by Anti-Government Elements also increased in 2011, with UNAMA documenting 495 such killings across the country”. It also accused the Taliban of the “indiscriminate use” of so-called Improvised Explosive Devices, basically home-made mines, responsible for one third of all civilian casualties (UNAMA 2012: 1, 3-4). Despite heavy losses, the Taliban not only survived the surge; they did not lose the capacity to recruit new fighters and appoint new commanders but further increased territorial control and their parallel government institutions (Ruttig 2010b: 16-8).

Imitating then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s concept of “fight, talk and build” (US DoS 2011), the Taliban reached out to the Afghan government at the same time. One way to do so was to distinguish between what they considered ‘legitimate targets’ – government officials and officers in the security forces continued to be targeted while teachers and schools were exempted. In a new version of their *layha* published in 2010, all provisions declaring the education system a target were dropped. A new Taliban quasi-state body was introduced, a Education Commission (as were commissions for health affairs and for dealing with NGOs). It was drafted by the Taliban’s Cultural Commission, and there are indications that the Taliban education minister during the Emirate period, Amir

Khan Mutaqi, “one of the[ir] more educated and political commanders”, had a key role in it (Clark 2011: 5-6, 14). Mutaqi was also the Taleban’s chief negotiator with the UN in 2000 (Ruttig 2015) and has been again since at least since 2011 (Clark 2013).

The Taleban reduced their direct attacks against schools, teachers and students. Local deals between the Taleban and the MoE led to a number of schools being re-opened (Giustozzi/Franco 2013: 16). At around the same time, aid groups were also reported entering into safe passage agreements or even registering with the Taleban, reflecting a changed policy of the insurgents vis-à-vis NGOs (Trofimov/Totakhil 2011).

This crystallised into a full-fledged Taleban-government pact in 2011 (Rubin 2016: 9/10), and the level of violence dropped very substantially starting in the second half of 2010 and even more so in 2011. Giustozzi/Franco (2011: 1-3) say it might have been mediated by former Taleban Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakkel (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 2-3) who had reconciled with the government in 2003. More than 600 schools were re-opened between 2009 and 2012 (Trofimov 2012).

The government never made this fully official but had reports leaked to the media about a deal on girls’ education. In January that year, education minister Faruq Wardak told the Times Education Supplement: “What I am hearing at the very upper policy level of the Taliban is that they are no more opposing education and also girls’ education” (Boone 2011) – avowing the term ‘agreement’. President Karzai followed up in April that year, telling university graduates that “if it is proved that [Taleban chief] Mullah Omar has really ordered the Taleban not to prevent children from accessing education, I will thank him” (Daneshju 2011). In 2012, deputy education minister Muhammad Sediq Patman denied any deal was concluded but maintained that in order to keep the schools open in Taleban-controlled areas “the Education Ministry had shown flexibility to this issue” (Walsh 2012). Taleban commanders in the field openly talked about such an agreement (Giustozzi/Franco 2011: 2-3).

That there was a change in the Taleban attitude towards education was also immediately confirmed by reports from various provinces: The British Guardian found “large numbers of girls’ schools open for business in the largely Taliban-controlled district of Chahardara in Kunduz province” as well as “that some local insurgent leaders have struck deals with [local representatives of] Wardak’s education ministry to keep schools open” in general. The governor of Kapisa northeast of Kabul told an Afghan media outlet that the Taleban in his province were no longer interfering in projects there (Daneshju 2011). The Afghanistan Analysts Network (Ruttig 2011) found the same in Ghazni province – but also

that the Taleban set their conditions. The conditions, more or less, remain unchanged to this day in their education policy:

»According to local sources, the Taleban have abandoned their 'very hard stance against schools' they had in general in 2008/09 for a more flexible approach *under the pressure of the local population* [my emphasis]. It had started in Andar and Waghaz districts where the people pushed for the reopening of the schools that were closed for many years. Now, schools are said to be operating in all Pashtun (i.e. mainly Taleban-controlled) districts of Ghazni; in Andar, even girls' schools are also said to be working. But the curriculum is not the government's – it is developed by the Taleban. (They probably have teachers amongst their supporters.) At least one teacher at every school is named by the Taleban, or, if already there, is made their representative. He must clear all other teachers employed at his school. This resembles the days of the Emirate when the village mullahs were made 'the eyes and ears' of the Taleban.«

The government had reasons not to talk too openly about the agreement as it had to make a number of concessions to the Taleban. There were "minor changes to the core curriculum [...] to increase the time spent on religious education [...], textbook passages considered controversial" were "modified". By the agreement the government also "ceded to the Taleban some influence over recruitment of teachers and monitoring their attendance and performance, including using laptop computers provided by the MoE. The Taliban may even collect some payments from MoE officials for these services" (Rubin 2016: 9/10). According to Giustozzi/Franco (2013: 1) it was also agreed that certain "subjects (such as English language for girls)" were excluded from curriculum, co-education remained banned (this would not have found a majority on the government's side either, with its strong Islamist components) and the Taleban were allowed to "proselytise". An official confirmation about an agreement with the Taleban including such concessions would also have created protest.

But the strategy was clear: the government was hoping to turn the deal with the Taleban on education into a broader political agreement. As Wardak said in his January 2011 interview:

I hope, Inshallah, soon there will be a peaceful negotiation, a meaningful negotiation with our own opposition ... and that will not compromise at all the basic human rights and basic principles which have been guiding us to provide quality and balanced education to our people.'

Giustozzi/Franco (2011: 2-3) called education the Taleban "first confidence-building measure in moving towards political negotiations" with the Afghan

government. With President Barack Obama replacing his predecessor George W. Bush in early 2009, the American veto finally fell in the context of the US troop surge; searching for entry points into talks with the Taleban became part of the double strategy of “fighting and talking” at the same time. A wave of talks started – or rather: talks about talks as they all were exploratory meetings with the aim to start meaningful *negotiations* for a political settlement in Afghanistan. In 2009, Karzai sent a small delegation including former Taleban members to Saudi Arabia to seek the kingdom’s help in kick-starting talks with the Taliban. Meetings on the Maldives and in Abu Dhabi happened in the same year, bringing together interlocutors from different insurgent groups, the government and independent Afghan politicians and civil society actors. But they were often uncoordinated, and it remained unclear whether participants really represented ‘their’ groups, or whether they were authorised to speak on their behalf. In September 2010, President Karzai created the High Peace Council (HPC), officially as a means to open talks with the Taleban. But the Taleban did not consider the body impartial. It was also heavily funded but not supervised by the West, became a corruption generator and remained ineffective. Even the negotiations that led to the widely celebrated September 2016 peace agreement with the second largest (but much smaller than the Taleban) insurgent group, the Islamic Party of Afghanistan (Hezb-e Islami), were mainly conducted through the National Security Council. In October 2010 a meeting in Kabul followed, organised by a US-based think tank, featuring among others former Taleban and education minister Wardak; it might well have served as a conduit for talks about education (Ruttig 2010a). CIA officials reportedly held clandestine meetings with “top Taliban leaders, some at the level of the Taliban’s shadow Cabinet ministers” (Gannon 2010). The UN representative to Afghanistan, Kai Eide, met Taleban envoys in Dubai in the spring of 2009 and in early 2010 who – according to some inside sources – had indeed been authorized by Mullah Omar (Ruttig 2012).

Less well known was a direct channel established between the US government and the Taleban leadership with the help of Germany and Qatar. Based in the latter country, a dialogue ensued for mutual confidence-building measures, such as the exchange of prisoners. Indeed, the only known US soldier held by the Taleban was exchanged against five high-ranking Taleban members held in Guantanamo in June 2014 (Clark 2013). But the talks broke down in March 2012, after mutual misunderstandings; and the Taleban’s semi-official liaison office in Qatar had to be closed in June 2013 after an intervention by Karzai who, at that point, insisted that all peace talks be conducted through Kabul. (The Taleban were officially not ready for such direct contacts.) Also Norway pursued channels of “peace diplomacy“, between 2007 and 2010 and between 2012 and

2013, sometimes openly (including a meeting between Afghan women politicians and Taleban representatives in Oslo in mid-2015), but they also faltered (Wilkins 2016). New attempts to set up peace negotiation through Pakistan in 2013 and the Quadrilateral Coordination Group consisting of Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US in 2015/16 – already under the new president Ghani – met the same fate (Osman 2015; Ruttig 2016).

As a result, also the discussions between the Taleban and the Ministry of Education stalled. The trend of re-opening schools was partially reversed but the number of closed schools sank further, from 1,247 in September 2012 to 471 in March 2013, according to MoE figures (Giustozzi/Franco 2013: 1, 16).¹⁴ According to the UN, in 2015 there were still 82 verified incidents of “attacks on schools and protected personnel [...] attributed to the Taleban [...] including the killing, injury and abduction of education personnel”, despite the Talebans’ policy change. There were also 13 such cases attributed to groups affiliated to the Afghan chapter of the Islamic State (Daesh), 11 to undetermined armed groups, one to the Pakistani Taleban (who also operate in Afghanistan) and 23 to the Afghan government forces and pro-government militias. In 2016, this number dropped to 94 such documented incidents, including 13 of targeted killings aimed at education professionals, resulting in the deaths of 11 civilians and injury to 10 others. All those incidents resulted in 91 civilian casualties (24 deaths and 67 injured) (UN 2016: 6; UNAMA 2017: 22-3). In the case of the Taleban, this indicates the degree of autonomy their field commanders continue to possess, the gap between political statements and their practical implementation and the “strategic dilemma“ they face between their need to “intimidate the population enough to deter ‘collaboration’ with the Afghan government and foreign forces, but neither be so unforgiving as to deter ‘collaborators’ from switching sides” (Clark 2011: 5) and projecting themselves as those who serve the population better.

Both sides in the war – the Taleban as well as government forces and their western allies – also continue, in an increasing number of cases, to frequently occupy schools and turn them into temporary military bases or command structures. (In many districts, the school continues to be one of the few larger and reinforced buildings.) For 2015, the UN reported “35 schools (compared to 12 schools in 2014 and ten schools in 2013) were used for military purposes for a

14 This report describes a rift within the Taleban, between their Leadership Council (‘Quetta shura’) and the so-called Peshawar Shura, including over the Taleban education policy. In hindsight, this rift seems to have been overstated, as the ‘Quetta shura’ remained the sole decision-making body of the Taleban movement.

cumulative total of 1,311 days, the majority (24) by Pro-Government Forces.” More widely, it also reported for the same year 132 “conflict incidents against schools” in 27 provinces – “an 86 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2014 and a 110 per cent increase compared to 2013” –, 369 schools were closed, 139,000 pupils and 600 teachers out of school due to conflict as well as 75 education staff either killed, injured or abducted (UN 2016: 6). For the first half of 2016, it documented the military use of 18 schools “for periods variedly ranging between days and months – 15 schools used by Afghan security forces and three by Anti-Government Elements.” The figures are probably too low, as the UN and other bodies face increasing limitations in accessing wide areas of the country due to the deteriorating security situation. On 7 December 2016, education minister Balkhi said that 1006 schools remained closed in the whole of Afghanistan due to ongoing war and insecurity.

7. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Since the end of 2014, the original but not implemented pull-out date for the western troop deployments according to Obama’s 2009 election campaign pledge, the character of the war has changed. Afghans dominate on the military battlefield; with Western troops in supportive roles, although very often still tipping the balance to one or the other side – by providing certain support like air strikes, transportation and intelligence to the government side or withholding it (mainly because sharply diminished troop numbers make it impossible to assist in every battle).

In a more ‘Afghan’ environment, the battle about education and the schools in Afghanistan remains on the agenda. With Afghanistan divided into the three ‘zones’ of control – government-controlled, Taleban-controlled and contested – schools remain targets mainly in the contested zone. In the other schools, a new competition for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the population has set in. The question to be answered is: which side will be able to provide better education ‘services’ to the population? With no significant changes in the strategic military balance imminent (although things in Afghanistan always can change out of the blue) and no meaningful peace talks ongoing, however, there also seems to be a stalemate in the field of education.

The conflict between modernising and conservative forces continues to rage. An end is not in sight. Frontlines are perhaps less clear than ever – and there are two ‘frontlines’: physical control over the schools and their personnel as an expression of the militarily confrontation, and the battle over political-ideological dominance, expressed by conflicts over the content of education. Surprisingly

enough, differences between the government and the Taleban over content have diminished.

The Taleban in their declared policy, have taken on board the idea that the young population, including the girls, need schooling, including in modern subjects, provided there is strong, religiously motivated oversight. In August 2013, a proclamation on the occasion of an Islamic holiday attributed to Mullah Omar (who had died four months before)¹⁵ stated, “To protect ourselves from scarcity and hardships, our young generations should arm themselves with religious and modern education, because modern education is a fundamental need in every society in the present time” (quoted from Rubin 2016: 11). Remarkably, the new Taleban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada – who is widely portrayed as an ultra-conservative – is reported to have had a role in drafting the Taleban pro-education policy published in 2012.

But while they probably physically control a majority of the teachers, students and schools, at the same time, they do not seem to be able – both financially and conceptionally – to roll out an education system of their own. Also, resistance against modern and particularly girls’ education continues to exist in their ranks, finding its expression in reduced, but continuing attacks on schools. This resistance, though, rather springs from the context of a still or – as a backlash to the 1980s communist reforms – even more conservative society, reflected in the practical behaviour of local Taleban fighters and commanders. It also finds counterparts in the government’s ranks.

The government, meanwhile, with its international support seems to be better placed to provide funding, teachers’ training and general infrastructure. But it continues to struggle with the deeply rooted corruption, low effectiveness and inflated figures that undermine the claimed post-2011 success stories in the education sector. Furthermore, Islamist and conservative-religious elements are extremely strong on the government’s side, too. They have consolidated their dominance in many spheres of the public discourse; anti-Western sentiments are deeply rooted and have taken root in wide sections and possibly even in a majority of the young generation. (Ruttig 2014; Osman 2015: 30-1).

Widespread Taleban control forces the government to compromise. The Taleban education policy – seeing it as a “basic human need,” including for girls, “within the scope of Sharia and Afghan traditions” (Rubin 2016: 6) – is not a contradiction to the government’s approach although the latter is more progressive. But the government cannot be seen as doing anything against the sharia and

15 This fact, however, only transpired in 2015 in the middle of the Murree talks organised through the Quadrilateral Coordination Group.

the Afghan traditions. Giustozzi/Franco (2013: 14) quote an MoE advisor expressing “sympathy” for the insurgents’ (in that case Hezb-e Islami’s)¹⁶ position that “education should be Islamic and not influenced by non-Muslims, but education opportunities for girls should be guaranteed.”

The cooperation between the Afghan government and the Taleban and their compromises over education indicate there might be space for more compromise. It also signals that the gap between both – despite both sides’ commitment to continue to fight each other and the Taleban – at least public – rejection of any direct political talks is not insurmountable. Even more so, as in the education sector, with pragmatic cooperation. But in the end, Afghanistan does not only need a functioning education system and modern educated new generations, but a political resolution to the current conflicts and an end to the war. Only this will ensure that the current situation, and much of what has been built after 2001 – although often agonisingly slowly – can be protected and built on.

16 The Afghan government concluded a peace agreement with Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan (Islamic Party of Afghanistan) in September 2016 that, if implemented, will end the party’s role as one of the armed anti-government organisations (Ruttig 2017).

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