



### From the Editor

*I hope that we all entered 2019 in good spirits and look forward to good things to come. The year will bring a major change to SAWA, and it is difficult to predict how it will work out.*

*I have been SAWA (SA)'s convener for 14 years now. Over those years we enabled OPAWC, the Organisation for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities, to teach thousands of illiterate women to read and write and helped many of them to learn a skill that allows them to make an income and support their families. We also donated a new ambulance and an ultrasound system to OPAWC's Hamoon Clinic in Farah Province.*

*To look after such a successful organisation is very satisfying, and I would not consider stepping back from my role as convener without a very good reason. Unfortunately such a reason has presented itself. Two years ago I was diagnosed with cancer of the duodenum, a rare form of stomach cancer. I went through a lengthy operation, but it seems that this does not stop it from slowly growing. I can see the time come where I will no longer be able to act as convener.*

*The SAWA (SA) committee and friends want SAWA's work to continue but fear that without my involvement that may not happen. OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre in Kabul depends entirely on the \$50,000 we send every year and would not be able to function without it. SAWA (SA) has built up a dedicated group of supporters; many send donations on various occasions. Several have set up the invaluable help of sending regular monthly donations through our online donation page at GiveNow, so it seems that our work is secured for the future if we can find someone who will take over from me.*

*The committee is searching for a new convener and hopeful that the issue can be resolved. I intend to continue as newsletter editor as long as I can and keep you up to date with the situation.*

*Matthias Tomczak*

### Will 2019 be worse than 2018?

*The following assessment is an edited extract of a report from the news service of the United Arab Emirates of 30 December 2018:*

Afghanistan, by some measures, overtook Syria as the world's deadliest conflict zone in 2018. After a year of record bloodshed, Afghans are bracing for an even deadlier 2019 with the threat of a US drawdown and a looming presidential vote likely to fuel violence.

President Donald Trump's plan to slash the number of US soldiers in Afghanistan before negotiators have struck a peace deal with the Taliban has crushed hopes among many Afghans for an end to the 17-year conflict.

Ordinary Afghans, who have long borne the brunt of the relentless fighting, say they feel increasingly despondent about the future as the Taliban and the ISIS adapt to ramped up security to carry out almost daily attacks on civilians and security forces.

"It is getting worse every day," says electrical engineering student Mohammad Hussain in Kabul, one of the deadliest places in the country for civilians. "The security we had four or five years back was better than now. Even when we don't have attacks in Kabul, we are waiting for something to happen."

Zabihullah Shirzad, who owns a garbage collecting company in the Afghan capital, said he could not remember a bloodier year than

2018 and predicted 2019 would be even deadlier. "We will see more killing and bloodshed," the 42-year old says. "I am not optimistic about the peace talks."

Their gloomy comments reflect the findings of a Gallup poll published in October, which showed an unprecedented level of pessimism among Afghans.

And an Asia Foundation study in December suggested more than 60 per cent of Afghans thought the country was moving in the wrong direction – unchanged from a year earlier.

Several key indicators show Afghan security locked in a downward spiral, underscoring their negativity.

Civilian deaths hit a record high in the first half of the year, while the Taliban are slaughtering Afghan forces in greater numbers than ever before.

This year was also marked by some of the deadliest suicide attacks since the start of the war in 2001, including an ambulance bomb blast that targeted a crowded street in Kabul in January, killing more than 100 people and wounding hundreds more.



*Two faces of Kabul: One day after a major suicide attack on 25 December 2018 a soldier secures the area outside the gate of a government building (top), while balloon vendors walk past the Ministry of Public Works (bottom).*

The bloodshed was exacerbated by Trump's decision, which he reluctantly announced in August 2017, to put thousands more US boots on the ground and giving its air units greater leeway to go after the Taliban and ISIS.

One estimate puts the number of conflict-related deaths at more than 40,000 this year – almost equal to the combined total for Syria and Yemen – according to data compiled by the US-based

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project. Afghanistan also took the unenviable title of the deadliest country in the world for journalists, with 15 media workers killed, including AFP chief photographer Shah Marai.

Adding to the misery was the worst drought in recent history, which forced more than 250,000 people to abandon their homes, overwhelming humanitarian agencies as they struggled to provide enough food and shelter.

Thousands of displaced families have set up makeshift tents on the edge of cities, and some are even selling their young daughters into marriage to repay debt or buy food.

"It was a very bad year – the situation has not improved at all," said Thomas Ruttig, co-director of Afghanistan Analysts Network.

Some observers saw positive signs that, if the circumstances are right, could translate into good news in 2019.

An unprecedented three-day ceasefire in June was widely celebrated by Afghans taking selfies and sharing ice cream with Taliban fighters, seemingly underscoring the desire for peace on both sides.

And the insurgents' apparent willingness to meet with US officials as part of a push for peace talks in recent months could bode well for a deal, said Lotfullah Najafizada, director of Afghanistan's largest private broadcaster Tolo News.

"I think Afghanistan will pass 2019 with some success. I hope it will be a historic year," Najafizada said.

But slashing US troop numbers – which many fear would be a harbinger for a full withdrawal – before any deal is struck could trigger a civil war "with a regional dimension", warned Davood Moradian, director general of the Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies.

But after so many years of war, Afghans are "more resilient" and the country would survive, Moradian said. "Many Afghans have learned to live with the chronic pain of war," he said. "That pain does not stop them pursuing a normal life."

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/afghans-brace-for-an-even-deadlier-2019-as-hope-for-peace-fades-1.807584>

## Who is in charge? Not the Afghan government

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*The following report is an edited extract of a report from the news service of the United Arab Emirates of 30 December 2018:*

The Taliban have rejected Kabul's offer of talks next month in Saudi Arabia where the militants will meet US officials to further peace efforts, a Taliban leader said on Sunday.

Representatives from the Taliban, the United States and regional countries met this month in the United Arab Emirates for talks to end the 17-year war in Afghanistan.

Saudi Arabia confirmed on Saturday they would be hosting the next round of peace talks, probably in January, Arab News reported.

But the Taliban have refused to hold formal talks with the Western-backed Afghan government.

"We will meet the US officials in Saudi Arabia in January next year and we will start our talks that remained incomplete in Abu Dhabi," a member of the Taliban's decision-making Leadership Council told Reuters. "However, we have made it clear to all the stakeholders that we will not talk to the Afghan government."

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid also said the leaders of the group would not talk to the Afghan government.

The militants have insisted on first reaching an agreement with the United States, which the group sees as the main force in Afghanistan since US-led forces toppled the Taliban government in 2001.

Diplomatic efforts to resolve the conflict have intensified after Taliban representatives started meeting US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad this year. Officials from the warring sides have met at least three times to discuss the withdrawal of international forces and a ceasefire in 2019.

But the United States has insisted that any final settlement must be led by the Afghans.

According to data from the Nato-led Resolute Support mission published in November, the government of President Ashraf Ghani has control or influence over 65 per cent of the population but only 55.5 per cent of Afghanistan's 407 districts, less than at any time since 2001. The Taliban say they control 70 per cent of the country.

A close aide to Mr Ghani said the government would keep trying to establish a direct line of diplomatic communication with the Taliban.

"Talks should be Afghan-led and Afghan-owned," the aide said on condition of anonymity. "It is important that the Taliban acknowledge this fact."

Last week Iran said they were hosting separate negotiations with the Taliban.

<https://www.thenational.ae/world/asia/saudi-arabia-to-host-third-round-of-taliban-peace-talks-1.807624>

## "Controlled instability": Iran and the Taliban

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*The following item is an abridged extract from The Diplomat of 14 November 2018:*

On October 23, the Terrorist Financing Targeting Centre (TFTC) imposed sanctions on two Iranian Quds Force officers for providing financial and military support to the Taliban. The decision, which was reached by the United States and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies, labelled Iran as complicit in terrorist attacks launched by the Taliban in recent months.

The Iranian government's restrained support for the Afghan Taliban is logical, as Tehran views the Taliban's belligerent conduct as a threat to Iran's national security. This threat perception has been heightened by a recent wave of terrorist attacks near the Iran-Afghanistan border. The frequency of these border clashes is a concern for Iranian policymakers, as instability in Afghanistan has adversely impacted Iran's economic wellbeing and national security.

Hamidreza Azizi, an assistant professor at Tehran's Shahid Beheshti University and an expert at the Valdai Discussion Club, told The Diplomat that Iranian authorities have struggled to contain the wave of Afghan refugees crossing the Iran-Afghanistan border. This refugee wave, combined with the lingering memories of the 1998 murder of 10 Iranian diplomats during the Taliban-orchestrated Mazar-i-Sharif siege, has caused Tehran to view a minimum degree of stability in Afghanistan as vital for Iran's national security.

These concerns have caused Iran to create a state of managed instability in Afghanistan, where it supports the Taliban enough to complicate U.S. military objectives in Afghanistan, but refrains from backing the organization's unbridled expansion. According to Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Wilson Centre, Iran's support for the Taliban is an effective way of retaliating against the United States for withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal, as it allows Tehran to undermine U.S. interests while clinging to a façade of plausible deniability.

<https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/managed-instability-iran-the-taliban-and-afghanistan/>



Partner NGOs: **OPAWC** (Organization for Promoting Afghan Women's Capabilities), **AFCECO** (Afghan Child Education and Care Organization)

## The student scholarship program closes down

For several years now some SAWA members have supported young women who grew up in one of AFCECO's foster homes and finished their high school education to enter university and get a degree. The program has been successful from the point of view of degree completions, with students obtaining law degrees, a medical degree and two arts degrees. Two dentistry students are still supported with ongoing scholarships.

From the point of view of the sponsors the program has not worked quite as well. Sponsors usually expect to be kept informed about the progress of their students and generally to be in regular, if infrequent, contact with them. AFCECO has been unable to organise such regular contact, and sponsors did not get news from their students for years. After extensive discussion with AFCECO management SAWA realised that the situation was unlikely to improve and reluctantly decided to discontinue the program.



*Shazia at her graduation ceremony in 2016.*

*Shazia was the first of the sponsored AFCECO students. she now works as the Managing Director of OPAWC.*

*Behind her can be seen Zubaida, another of the students sponsored by SAWA members.*

In contrast to the somewhat difficult relations with AFCECO, contact with OPAWC management has always been excellent. SAWA therefore decided to replace the AFCECO student scholarship program with a new sponsorship program for teachers at OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre. It is hoped that some of our supporters will see the importance of such sponsorships (details below) and take up a sponsorship for a teacher.

## New teacher sponsorships

With the closure of our AFCECO student scholarship program potential sponsors no longer have an opportunity to show their generosity by supporting women who gave their life to a better Afghanistan. After consultation with OPAWC we decided to set up a sponsorship program for the wonderful teachers at OPAWC's Vocational Training Centre. They are indeed the most admirable women worthy of support we can think of. For many years they selflessly and for little money taught women to read and write and learn income making skills, all the time struggling with personal issues and family problems.

So far the teacher salaries had to be covered by the general budget for the Centre. There is always uncertainty whether the budget can continue into the next year or may have to be cut, and the teachers had to take a pay cut on occasions. Sponsoring a teacher will give security into the future.

We have excellent contact with OPAWC and are sure that sponsoring a teacher will be rewarding for both sides. SAWA's web page <http://www.sawa-australia.org/projects/teacher-sponsorships> gives detailed information on the two literacy teachers, the sewing teacher and the embroidery teacher. If you think you can take up a sponsorship you can also get more information by emailing [info@sawa-australia.org](mailto:info@sawa-australia.org).

## Mirwas, embroidery teacher

Gaining access to the hearts and minds of men is as important as freeing the women from the shackles of tradition. While we generally aim at supporting women through our sponsorship program, we introduce here embroidery teacher Mirwas as an example how men change their attitude to the position of women in society:



My name is Mirwas. I was born in Logar, a neighbouring province to Kabul. I was in eight grade when the civil war burst out in 1992 and my family fled to Pakistan, where we spent the next decade. I started working at 14 and at 17 I got married. I have 5 children. We returned to Afghanistan in 2003 with the formation of the new government.

It has now been more than 10 years that I have been working in OPAWC as embroidery teacher. When I started teaching in OPAWC, I was hesitant to teach and engage with female students, and the girls were hesitant, too, given that neither of us had worked with the opposite gender before. But luckily both the students and I got used to the new environment and my opinions towards women changed.

I learned many things in the course of 10 years. Engaging with my female students I got awareness about their problems and their rights. I took my wife to OPAWC's Centre to attend the literacy course. She is now able to read and write. After I finish teaching at the Vocational Training Centre, I also work as a taxi driver until late evenings so I can afford the needs of my children. I would like to thank OPAWC for giving me the opportunity to work at their Centre.



**SAWA-Australia (NSW) PO Box 1741, Rozelle NSW 2039 website: [nsw.sawa-australia.org](http://nsw.sawa-australia.org)**  
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**Treasurer:** Margaret Bailey **Committee:** Maryellen Galbally, June Lunsmann, Jenny Matkevich,  
Joan Long, Denise Fahey, Robyn Longhurst. **Public Officer:** Deanna Fekete.  
[www.nsw.sawa-australia.org](http://www.nsw.sawa-australia.org); Facebook *Support Association for the Women of Afghanistan SAWA -NSW.*

## HIGHLIGHT THIS QUARTER



Our highlight for this quarter's SAWAN is this message and photo from OPAWC. The message again emphasised SAWA's decision from the very beginning not to impose our foreign ideas on what we might do for women in war torn Afghanistan, but to support the plans and hopes of local women who were much more able to understand what was needed for the aid and progress of women. In this message they are returning the compliment by wishing us well for a festival not celebrated in their religion.

## FUTURE FUNDRAISING HOPES FOR SAWA NSW

In the last SAWAN we highlighted the success of the education centre we fund in Khiwa District of Nangarhar Province. Many of the attendees, after the first year of operation, now have found employment. The proposed expansion of the project to teach literacy, tailoring and sewing skills means that we need to double our fundraising from about A\$20,000 to A\$40,000 and even that depends to some extent on what happens to the exchange rate of Australian currency to that of the USA.

Your Committee is promoting three new initiatives:

**1. New Tax-Deductible status:** This is available if you donate to our project listed on [www.givenow.com.au/rural](http://www.givenow.com.au/rural) Education Centre for Women in Rural Afghanistan. We have been pleased to see that some of our supporters are using this facility. If anyone has difficulty please ring our Convenor, Shirley Allen on 98185319 for advice. We do hope that readers of SAWAN may be able to spread the news of this facility which is of significant importance to some donors who have preferred other charities because of their tax deductibility.

**2. New venues:** We are searching for larger venues for our events so more people can attend to hear the SAWA story.

**3. Powerpoint Presentaion:** To facilitate outreach to fundraising organisations like Probus, Rotary and others, we have prepared a Power Point Presentation to present to any group who would like to hear about work for women in Afghanistan. We appeal to members and supporters to think of possible groups who may like to hear from us. Already one group in the Central West of NSW has invited us to present to their committee which decides on what charities to support in the coming years.

## RECENT EVENTS

- **13th ANNUAL LUNCH Friday 23 November 2018** was held at The Apprentice Restaurant, of TAFE in Ultimo. As with last year we had very positive reports from those who attended and we raised over \$3,000.
- **STALL Saturday 8 December** outside Woolworths Balmain 9-1pm raised \$ 600 and provided an opportunity to publicise SAWA.

## COMING EVENTS

- **Saturday 16 February 2019 8.30am to 1.00pm Stall in Balmain** outside Woolworths to raise funds to pay for the birthing kit contents which cost SAWA \$3,000 ie \$3 for 1000 kits. It is such a small amount per kit to save many lives of mothers and babies.
- **Monday 4 March 2019 Birthing Kit Assembly Morning** at the usual venue, gratefully donated by the Leichhardt Rowing Club, Glover St Leichhardt. 9.30am for 10.00 am introduction. This year there will be the inclinator lift for those who previously found the stairs at this venue too difficult.

**To RSVP and for more information** contact Shirley Allen phone 9818 5319 or our website above. As before Bronwyn Monro has kindly offered to provide one of her delicious morning teas

As each kit costs \$3 and we are seeking donations to cover this, so your contribution would be greatly appreciated. You can donate on the day or if you are unable to attend, and wish to make a donation, do so by cheque to the address above or by Direct Deposit to Bendigo Bank Rozelle as above.

- **Mid-Year Dinner in early May.** Details to be advised.
- **Film Saturday June 1, 5.30pm-8.30pm The Judge** at the Hannaford Centre 608 Darling St, Rozelle NSW 2039. This film has been promoted by a Wild film review as "a Middle Eastern Trailblazer on the Upholding of Women's Rights." It is described also as a "warm hearted" documentary. It features the life of Kholoud al-Faqih, the first woman to be appointed, in 2009, to the Middle East's religious courts. We hope you will find it very informative and interesting. An invitation will be sent closer to the date.



Photo taken at lunch on 23 November 2018