

# **Afghanistan's Scouting Experience: Enduring Through Conflict, Working Towards Peace**

**By Mina Sharif <sup>1</sup>**

For most outsiders, the past few decades in Afghanistan have mostly been synonymous with conflict and poverty. This holds true on several levels; but there was another reality few had the opportunity to witness in its fullness: expanding civil spaces, volunteerism, and community service. One such example is Afghanistan's nearly 100-year-old scouting program, which has endured through almost five decades of war, steadfast in its commitment to youth empowerment and public service. Few know of it, its work and legacy typically obscured by larger political headlines. Nonetheless, it remains one of the country's oldest civic institutions. Crucially, it is not a byproduct of the post-2001 era—the period to which the growth of Afghanistan's civil society is often unfairly attributed. Thus, its impact and resilience offer timely insights for youth empowerment and community service, especially in Afghanistan's context.

To extrapolate those lessons, this essay considers the significance of Afghanistan's scouting program for the country's past, present, and future, by examining its evolution, impact, and resilience. The first section contextualizes the history of Afghanistan's scouting program in relation to the history and features of the global scouting movement. The subsequent sections discuss the program's evolution through key periods in the country's history, its contributions, and the challenges it endured. The post-2021 context is briefly summarized in the penultimate section, followed by actionable policy recommendations to aid the scouting program's continuation in the current context.

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## In-Context: Scouting & Afghanistan

With 63.7% of its population younger than 25 years of age,<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan is a country with a substantial youth bulge. Its youth embody prospects for significant (in)tangible demographic dividends, including hope for peace and prosperity in the country, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Afghan scouting program has contributed impactfully in this regard, both in the past and present. Throughout its history, it has encountered numerous challenges resulting from multiple, successive politico–security transitions. Nonetheless, the program has endured even in the most trying of times and despite repeated and extended loss of its official status.<sup>3</sup>

Born in the UK in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the global scout movement currently features over 170 national scouting organizations (NSO) worldwide, with the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) functioning as their global nodal body.<sup>4</sup> Scouting was initially designed for boys aged 11 through 15, subsequently expanding to include girls. Scouting is intended and designed as youth-oriented frameworks for fostering civic-mindedness, and practical skills via outdoor activities. Historically, however, Afghanistan’s scouting programs have prioritized community service. Thus, their thrust has been slightly different as compared to activities like map-reading etc. that are typically associated with scouting in most countries.<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, Afghanistan’s experience with scouting is nearly as old as the scout movement itself, commencing less than 25 years after the first scout association was formed. The two also share an (indirect) historical link: as a cavalry officer of the British Army in 1880, the global scout movement’s founder had charted maps of Kandahar’s Maiwand battlefield after the British troops’ defeat in a pivotal battle of the second Anglo–Afghan War.<sup>6</sup>

2. UNFPA Afghanistan. (n.d.). [What We Do] Young People. [online] Available at: <https://afghanistan.unfpa.org/en/node/15227>.

3. World Scout Bureau (2021). World Scout Conference Resolutions 1920 - 2021. [online] World Organization of the Scout Movement, p.57, p.81, p.83, p.178. Available at: [https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library\\_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true](https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true).

4. World Organization of the Scout Movement. (n.d.). Scouting’s History. [online] Available at: <https://www.scout.org/who-we-are/scout-movement/scoutings-history>.

5. Mayne, E. (2007). 35,000 flock to join the Afghan Scouts. The Telegraph. [online] 12 Aug. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1560122/35000-flock-to-join-the-Afghan-Scouts.html>.

6. Kiernan, R. (1939). Baden-Powell: For Boys of All Ages. London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., pp.17–23.

## Scouting in Afghanistan: A Contextual Timeline

Scouting in Afghanistan formally commenced in 1931 with the establishment of the *Anjuman-i Kashafan*,<sup>7</sup> as its national nodal association.<sup>8</sup> In 1947, it was dissolved by the government after misunderstandings over scout campfires led to allegations of fire worship.<sup>9</sup> A decade later, it was re-established as the Afghanistan Scout Association (ASA),<sup>10</sup> and was admitted as a WOSM member in 1964.<sup>11</sup> With the active support of Afghanistan's then monarch King Zahir Shah, the ASA grew rapidly and featured around 36,000 members (male and female) from across the country at its peak. This was short-lived, however, as the ASA was disbanded after the 1978 *coup d'état*. Some scouting activities that continued sporadically also ceased after the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> The ruling communist regime was quick to attempt misusing scouts for political interest — including by coercing scout troops and leaders for policing. By 1981, the ASA had lost its WOSM membership.<sup>13</sup> Thereon, unable to operate properly till the end of the first Taliban regime in 2001, the ASA never qualified for regaining its WOSM membership for nearly 32 years.

During the post-2001 years, scouting in Afghanistan grew in numbers, activities, and impact thanks to joint efforts by national and international actors.<sup>14</sup> Efforts to revive scouting commenced almost immediately after the new transitional government was established in 2002, albeit with relatively limited success until around 2008–09. In 2004, the World Scout Bureau, through its Asia-Pacific Support Center, initiated visits of

7. Roughly translates to 'association of' 'explorers'/'discoverers'/'scouts' in Persian.

8. Ministry of Information and Culture [Republic of Afghanistan] (1974). Afghanistan Republic Annual 1974. [online] Kabul: Department of Publicity of Afghanistan, pp.260–261. Available at: <http://afghandata.org:8080/xmlui/handle/azu/6958>.

9. Gallagher, M. (2012). Chairman's Notes: November/December 2012. [online] Scout and Guide Stamps Club. Available at: <https://www.sgsc.org.uk/chairnote/chairnote326.htm>. Also see: St. George Saunders, H. (1948). *The Left Handshake: The Boy Scout Movement during the War 1939-1945*. London: Collins, p.132.

10. 'Da Afghanistan Sarandoy Tolana' in Pashto

11. World Scout Bureau (2021). World Scout Conference Resolutions 1920 - 2021. [online] World Organization of the Scout Movement, p.57. Available at: [https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library\\_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true](https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/1920-2021%20WSCConf%20Resolutions%20and%20Index%20EN.pdf?iframe=true).

12. Magnier, M. (2013). For Afghan Scouts, 'Be prepared' takes on a new meaning. Los Angeles Times. [online] 13 Jun. Available at: <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-xpm-2013-jun-13-la-fg-afghanistan-scouts-20130614-story.html>.

13. Ibid. World Scout Bureau, p.83.

14. World Organization of the Scout Movement (2020). Afghanistan rejoins the World Scout Movement. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/WOSM.OMMS/videos/afghanistan-rejoins-the-world-scout-movement/472504540312490/>.

Scout Leaders from the around the region to Kabul, to collaborate with Afghanistan's Ministry of Education. With funding and practical support from the UN and Afghanistan's reconstituted Ministry of Education, scouting resumed. The Afghanistan National Scout Organization (ANSO) was instituted as the country's NSO, which went on to regain Afghanistan's WOSM membership in 2020.<sup>15</sup> By 2007–08, the government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) had integrated scouting in its national education strategy.<sup>16</sup>

To catalyze the revival of scouting programs, around 2008, the GIROA enlisted a Kabul-based, international non-government organization (NGO) called the Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation Support to Afghanistan (PARSA), which had been operating in the country since 1996. The result was 'PARSA Afghan Scouts', support for which gradually followed in the form of small grants and practical support from diverse (inter)national sources, including the WOSM. PARSA-led reinforcement for the revival began with efforts to set up scout troops at two orphanages in Kabul, which resulted in two troops (one male and one female). A more comprehensive rebuilding of the scouting program followed in 2010, which produced approximately 700 active scouts at orphanages in Kabul and Ghor provinces within a year.

Collaboratively, the Ministry of Education, the ANSO, and PARSA approached schools and (private and government-operated) orphanages to assemble scout troops comprised of eligible and interested children. These children were recommended either by community elders or by PARSA. The ANSO and PARSA worked in close coordination throughout this period and within a decade, the country had scout troops in all 34 provinces, totaling around 11,000 active scouts (nearly half of whom were girls)<sup>17</sup> and 600 trained scoutmasters across all provinces.<sup>18</sup> PARSA managed around

15. Ibid. World Scout Bureau, p.178

16. Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2007). National Education Strategic Plan for Afghanistan 1385-1389. [online] pp.50–55, pp.105–106. Available at: <https://neqmap.bangkok.unesco.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/National-Education-Strategic-Plan-for-Afghanistan.pdf>.

17. Instead of learning how to build a campfire, Afghan Scouts learn how to avoid mines. (2016). Agence France-Presse/The National. [online] 24 Jul. Available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/instead-of-learning-how-to-build-a-campfire-afghan-scouts-learn-how-to-avoid-mines-1.169455>.

18. Tyson, A.S. (2021). They found hope in Afghanistan. Now they strive to preserve it. The Christian Science Monitor.

2300 scouts in orphanages and community centers, and approximately 8000 more were managed by the Ministry of Education through schools. By 2012, Afghanistan's first scout training facility had also been realized.

### **Contributions & Impact**

Community service is an essential component of Afghanistan's scouting programs, whose scope includes a host of activities like planting trees, carrying out essential repairs at orphanages, neighborhood clean-ups, garbage collection facility installations, solar panel installations, library donations, providing sanitation packages for hospital patients and prison inmates, and collaborating with police personnel to paint traffic signs, to name a few.<sup>19</sup> Scouting offered an opportunity for Afghan children to learn things they did not (or could not) at school, and especially so in those areas where schools did not offer scouting programs. Scouting programs placed considerable emphasis on their mental and physical health, and their interaction with the community. Focused action on these aspects of life offers substantial tangible and intangible benefits. For instance, it aids character building, and vocational and leadership skills to direct recipients of such support, and (in)directly benefits those around those recipients.

Scouts consistently left lasting impressions on the communities they served, leading by action and service. In Kandahar for example, scout troops visited small schools outside the city center and carried out essential repairs in classrooms, cleaned school furniture, and delivered donated school supplies. They were equally proactive in raising grassroots awareness on the benefits of service and protection of towns and cities through acts of kindness and attention to the environment. For example, they delivered public lectures across the country, distributed fabric bags, and encouraged the use of reusable products and materials.<sup>20</sup>

Afghan scouts' community service activities have been well received, particularly in those regions of the country that have seen little or no benefit

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[online] 28 Sep. Available at: <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2021/0928/They-found-hope-in-Afghanistan.-Now-they-strive-to-preserve-it>.

19. PARSA Afghan Scouts Program. (n.d.). About [Scouting Activities]. [online] Available at: <https://www.afghan-scouts.org/about/>.

20. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

from the international donor community or the national government's promise of support for education. In an interview, former Scout Troop Leader Jawad Omari explained, "we have adults or even children from communities approach us and say they'd like an opportunity to develop a scout troop in their community. They recruit other children, and we train a local troop leader and provide uniforms and supplies as needed to conduct their activities."<sup>21</sup>

### Challenges Between 2001 & 2021

The post-2001 revival of Afghanistan's scouting program was not without challenges, most of which still persist. To illustrate, the ANSO's 'National Strategic Plan 2020-2023' for its 'Vision 2030' identified 10 challenges: inadequate numbers of Scout Leaders; low levels of public awareness regarding scouts' activities; lack of proper implementation of the Afghanistan National Youth Policy;<sup>22</sup> lack of scout centers for scouting units; funding shortages; inadequate commitment among trainers; "relative financial support;" lack of coordination among trainers; lack of requisite intra-ANSO communication; and lack of management in scouting activities'.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, scout troops routinely encountered apprehensions from local communities, for a variety of reasons. For example, their uniforms generated suspicions as to whether the program intended to aid foreign influence in their communities. This was because scout uniforms share some features (such as neckerchiefs) with uniforms of the 'Komsomol'<sup>24</sup> — a Soviet youth organization loosely modelled on the scout movement — whose members propagated communist ideologies in Afghanistan in the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Confusion arising from the program's name also fed these

21. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

22. Afghanistan National Youth Policy. (2014). [online] Office of the Deputy Ministry of Youth Affairs, Ministry of Information and Culture. Available at: [https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2196/file/afg-publication\\_youth-policy.pdf%20.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/afghanistan/media/2196/file/afg-publication_youth-policy.pdf%20.pdf).

23. Afghanistan National Scout Organization (2020). National Strategic Plan 2020-2023. [online] pp.7-8. Available at: [https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library\\_files/ANSO-%20BOOKLET-%20VISION%202030.pdf](https://members.scout.org/sites/default/files/library_files/ANSO-%20BOOKLET-%20VISION%202030.pdf).

24. Short for 'Kommunisticheskiy Soyuz Molodyozhi', which translates to 'Communist Youth League' in English.

25. Farmer, B. (2012). Scout movement targeted by suspicious Afghan extremists. The Sydney Morning Herald. [online] 22 Oct. Available at: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/scout-movement-targeted-by-suspicious-afghan-extremists-20121022-281gj.html>. Also see: Nunan, T. (2016). Humanitarian Invasion: Global Development in Cold War Afghanistan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.151.

concerns, since scouts are informally referred to in Pashto as *Sarandoy*.<sup>26</sup> This was due to the fact that during the communist-rule era, ‘Sarandoy’ had also been the name of an interior ministry-run paramilitary agency that featured large numbers of voluntary recruits in its ranks.<sup>27</sup>

Clerics and other conservative figures were also highly critical. “There was an instance in a village near the city center in Herat. We were stopped from carrying on with our work because religious leaders had become suspicious of our appearance. There are several similar instances, and we had to be patient and understanding. It was our job to remain transparent about our work and ease their worries. This is how we gained the trust of the communities,” Omari recounted.<sup>28</sup>

Sustainability of funding was also a challenge. Financial support came in relatively small bursts, mostly via official and individual donors from within and outside Afghanistan. Typically, scouting programs in other countries collect membership fees. However, this was never a feature of Afghanistan’s scouting programs because many scouts hail from marginalized communities, and such fees stand to price them out of participation.<sup>29</sup> On the flipside, this context-responsive approach also meant Afghan scouting remained dependent on (non-)financial support from government and private donors, resulting in limitations on their capacity to expand reach, activities, and impact.

### **Challenges & Resilience: Post August 2021**

The August 2021 collapse of the IRA made the ANSO’s WOSM membership vulnerable again. The collapse was compounded by severe humanitarian challenges and operational constraints resulting from the Taliban takeover and the withdrawal of international development aid to Afghanistan. Despite these multi-dimensional challenges, Afghan scouting has managed to remain active.

26. Short for Da Afghanistan Sarandoy Tolana, the ASA’s name in Pashto.

27. Oliker, O. (2011). Mol and KhAD Security Forces During the 1980s. In: Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience. [online] Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, pp.25–35. Available at: [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND\\_MG1078.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2011/RAND_MG1078.pdf).

28. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

29. Omari M.J. (2022). Interviewed by Mina Sharif. 2 July, Online.

In the immediate aftermath of the collapse, scouting activities and engagement were initially redirected to emergency response efforts. PARSА-led fundraising efforts resulted in the creation of an emergency fund to support scout troops in marginalized communities, and troop leaders who were abruptly rendered unemployed. A camp for internally displaced persons was also established on PARSА grounds. Families hosted at these camps were provided with essential supplies kits that included tents, electricity, water, mattresses, pillows, blankets, and sanitary napkins, as well as food packs that included dried milk, formula, and diapers. Three cooked meals were also provided daily, along with childcare facilities, and activities for children.

Alongside emergency response, Afghan scouts have continued some of their standard activities like food package distribution, garbage collection, and cleaning of schools and public university campuses. These activities have also been approved by the *de facto* authorities.<sup>30</sup> This demonstrates how Afghan scouting is striking a delicate balance to adapt to the current paradigm without prejudice to its motto of public service.

## Conclusion

Scouting in Afghanistan has endured nearly five decades of war, and its post-2001 revival is a testament to its impact potential. Its post-August 2021 resilience is also due primarily to the strength, passion, and the spirit of volunteerism of its youth members. Leading by action and example through their service, Afghanistan's scouts have consistently delivered context-sensitive support for communities across the country, empowering them in the process. Their resilience inspires confidence, but it is also a disquieting reminder of the circumstances that demand it. For instance, the Taliban's gender-discriminatory policies isolate and disenfranchise girls, preventing them from participating as equals in scouting and community service activities. Girls' visibility is already on the decline in the ANSO's recent activity updates, communications, and digital platforms. It would be in the *de facto* authorities' interest to sustain scouts as a resource of

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30. Bernton, H. (2022). Washington woman returns to Afghanistan to continue aid mission in nation stalked by hunger. The Seattle Times. [online] 1 Jan. Available at: <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/washington-woman-returns-to-afghanistan-to-continue-aid-mission-forge-ties-with-taliban/>.



volunteer support for communities across the country. However, a repeat of the communist era experience — such as forced deployment of scouts for policing — is also a risk the present situation runs.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- The *de facto* authorities must, as priority, allocate and disburse funding via the Ministry of Education for training Scout Troop Leaders. Afghan scouts have a long and reliable track record of community service, supplemented by public trust hard earned through their contributions. In the prevailing humanitarian situation, optimally harnessing national capacity for public interest is crucial. Afghan scouts — male *and* female — can help mitigate some of the core strains communities across the country are currently experiencing.
- The *de facto* authorities should lift barriers and enable girl scouts to continue serving their communities. Serving fellow citizens is their right. Moreover, girl scouts are better placed to access and help women and girls in different parts of Afghanistan, since prevailing socio-cultural norms often call for gendered support systems.
- Afghan scouts — male *and* female — must be enlisted to facilitate humanitarian aid delivery operations. Their participation should be structurally integrated into operational frameworks for aid delivery. With their direct access to and existing work in orphanages and local communities across the country, they are a cadre of skilled youth with relevant experience vindicated by public trust. Their contributions will prove beneficial for efficient aid delivery, and for public services that have deteriorated since August 2021. Commencing with those orphanages from where some of the scout troops were first recruited would be a good starting point for a pilot phase.

#### **Disclosure & Statement of Competing Interest/s**

The author has reported the following information regarding her affiliation(s) with the subject(s)/organization(s) discussed in this essay: The author has previously been affiliated to PARSА, including as a producer for PARSА's Voice of Afghan Youth TV/Radio program.