

### Potters, Warlords, and the End of the Islamic Republic

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# EthnoScripts

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**The Fall of Kabul in 2021: Background, Effects, Resonance**  
**Der Fall Kabuls 2021: Hintergründe, Effekte, Resonanzen**

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Potters, Warlords, and the End of the Islamic Republic

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## Abstract

The town of Istalif, located in the plains of Parwan north of Kabul, and the political lives of the potters that live there, provide a rich ethnographic example for how even areas that supported the US invasion and the new government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan eventually became disillusioned with the rhetoric from these groups and their failure to produce real change in the lives of ordinary Afghans. The funding, both military and development, that poured into the country, particularly between 2009 and 2013, enriched a regional elite that was not interested in distributing wealth and political power, unlike more local leaders. This shift in the socio-economy of power in Istalif, and elsewhere in the country, helps explain the rapid collapse of the Islamic Republic, but also shows how local politics in Afghanistan reshaped US policy and its approach to intervention and empire.

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## Potters, Warlords, and the End of the Islamic Republic

Noah Coburn and Arsalan Noori

### Introduction

Nestled between two orchard-covered hills at the base of the Koh-e Baba mountains, Istalif is a scenic town that overlooks the Shomali Plain north of Kabul. The Istalif river runs through the valley and feeds into a series of irrigation channels that flow into the grape vineyards and the mulberry and walnut orchards. On the northern hill is a peaceful shrine with a holy man, whom the town's women visit to receive blessings. A hotel built on a bluff overlooking the town provided accommodation for a steady stream of international and Afghan tourists, in particular in the 1960s and 1970s. On Fridays, the town fills up with people from the area selling dried fruit, sheep and other livestock, and Afghans from Kabul picnicking alongside the river and purchasing locally made pottery, carpets, and other crafts. The town has been a centre of trade for the district for decades. Over the past twenty years, however, the way in which the townspeople interact with each other and with political leaders outside of the town has changed drastically. Istalif is a Tajik town, surrounded by Tajik and Pashtun villages. During the Taliban regime of the 1990s, the town had suffered and in 2001 initially welcomed the international community and the new Afghan government. Over the next twenty years, however, an increasing divide between rich and poor, powerful and marginalised, contributed to a growing distrust between and within political and kin groups. Despite the town's long anti-Taliban stance, these tensions generated a climate in which few lamented the collapse of the Ghani government in 2021, even if they feared the return of the Taliban.

The idyllic setting of the town belies its strategic and political import and its uniqueness. It overlooks Bagram Air Base, home of the Soviet and later the American military forces, and is a gateway to the mountains that have historically resisted state control (Barfield 2012). It has a craft industry, which includes a clan of potters that make distinct blue glazed pots for which the town is well known. These potters have long been one of the more influential groups in towns, socially and politically. The town has symbolic import: the rich and powerful from Kabul have been visiting here at least since Emperor Babur used it as his hunting grounds in the sixteenth century. In part because of its reputation, it was burnt to the ground by the British in 1842 in retribution for the destruction of the British Army during its retreat earlier that winter to Peshawar. It was again destroyed in the 1920s by Pash-

tun tribes from the south, and, most recently, by the Taliban in 1997 (Coburn 2011). The social and political history of the town over the past twenty years reflects wider trends in Afghanistan and helps explain how the international community spent so many resources in Afghanistan only to all but abandon the country in the summer of 2021.

As Robert Crews argues in *Afghan Modern*, Afghanistan has been both tied to, and shaped by, global forces in ways that are ignored by more common tropes that Afghanistan is ‘the graveyard of empires’ or that the international community is ‘saving’ Afghan women (Crews 2015). At the same time, whilst imperial battles between the Mongol, Mughal, British, Russian, Soviet, and now American Empires have played out in Afghanistan, and Afghanistan has helped define each of these empires, the internal politics of Afghanistan remain deeply defined by kinship, ethnic divisions, and the ways in which the mountains and geography of Afghanistan shape social and political relationships (Barfield 2012). Just as the British defeat in 1842 led to a reformulation of British imperial strategy in South Asia, the failure of development, state building, and even counterinsurgency initiatives in towns like Istalif has changed the way the United States (US) government sees its goals and capacities on the global stage.

As such, the recent history of the potters in Istalif does much to describe the wider political tensions of the past twenty years. It helps explain the failure of the US-led international coalition to bring stability to the country and the failure of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to establish an enduring state. It demonstrates in particular how international funding and perceived government corruption increased distrust between groups, making poorer members of the town increasingly resentful of the ruling elite.

This ethnographic analysis is based on research we conducted in and around the town since 2005, with sustained, on-the-ground ethnographic research between 2006 and 2008. We also did long term research in the area on the elections of 2009 and 2010. Since then, we have visited the town almost annually and stayed in contact with community members by phone calls and text messages. The original research focused on a small clan of potters, who are at the centre of the town’s social and political organisation. The stories of these potters in many ways demonstrate not only how, since 2000, Afghanistan has been defined by American and international approaches to development, intervention, and empire, but also how Afghans themselves have reshaped these concepts by both participating in and resisting these systems, from engaging in everyday actions like starting a business, voting in democratic elections, emigrating, and fighting against occupation.

The recent history of the potters shows how the international community repeatedly misunderstood Afghan politics and culture; how international development organisations remained unable to bring meaningful development to rural areas in Afghanistan; and how the international military force

repeatedly sided with commanders and contractors in a way that undermined the legitimacy of the western-backed Afghan state that was already perceived by many Afghans as corrupt and ineffective. All of this resulted in a growing divide between urban and rural areas, increased distrust within groups, and a disillusionment with the Afghan national government, even by those that had initially been supportive of it – enabling the Taliban to take advantage of the situation and rapidly seizing control of the country during the summer of 2021.

### A history of conflict

Despite the fact that Istalif's location in the valley makes it appear peripheral, the town has been related to many of the key political events of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The area held significant ties to the national ruling elite, even though it was removed from the urban centre of Kabul. As a result, the town was involved in many of Afghanistan's conflicts (see the timeline in this volume), including its destruction in 1842 by the British; it was also heavily damaged during Afghanistan's civil war in the 1920s (Dupree 1997; Kātib Hazārah and McChesney 1999; Coburn 2011). During the Soviet occupation of the 1980s, mujahideen fighters used the pathway that runs along the river through the town to access the valley from where they were located in the central mountains of Afghanistan, and the Soviet Army strafed the town repeatedly to discourage the use of the valley in this manner.

Political power in the town was historically divided amongst maliks, elders of kin groups such as the potters, and religious figures. Maliks were responsible for organising local celebrations. They were typically not supposed to be wealthy but leaders of the community as *primus inter pares*. Whilst, to this day, a malik might be somewhat wealthier than others in his group, a good malik should not, according to most, have considerably more wealth. Excessive resources would be evidence of greed and, probably, abuse of position. A malik's relative status in comparison with the rest of those living in the town helped encourage mutual trust.

Before the Soviet invasion of 1979, there was a single government office in the town, and maliks were often referred to as 'bridges' between the government and the people. The state, apart from collecting taxes from stores in the bazaar and conscripting young men, had little impact on the day-to-day lives of Istalifis (see Murtazashvili 2016; Giustozzi 2009). During the Soviet period and the Civil War that followed, another group of men, generally referred to as commanders, gained increasing importance. They were capable of mobilising weapons and men to defend the town and began to rival the power of the maliks.<sup>1</sup> Amongst the strongest of these were the ones associated with

1 In the popular media, these men are often referred to as *warlords*, but Istalifis prefer the more ambiguous term *commanders* (for more, see, for example, Giustozzi 2009).

Ahmed Shah Massoud, the Tajik leader from Panjshir Valley, who had held out against both the Soviets and the Taliban. This group would later evolve to become the Northern Alliance, but at this point it was not the only group with influence in Istalif, and there were several other jihadi groups that had a local following. Some of the young men in town joined these groups, but most did not; and Istalifi leaders attempted to retain a neutral stance towards them. After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in 1989, jihadi groups turned against each other, initiating the Civil War, part of which was the devastation of Kabul in the early 1990s. Istalif, in its rural setting, largely escaped this urban-centred violence.

The Civil War allowed the rise of a new group, the Taliban, who used extreme religious rhetoric and mobilised support especially amongst Pashtun tribes from the south (Rashid 2010; Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2018). In 1996 the group seized Kabul from the divided jihadi groups fairly easily but then encountered more resistance as it attempted to move north in early 1997. During the Taliban campaign to seize areas north of Kabul, particularly the military base at Bagram, Istalif became a point of contention. Mujahideen fighters, associated with Massoud, dug in on one side of the river and Taliban forces dug in on the other. After several days of intense fighting, Massoud's forces withdrew, leaving the town to the Taliban. The Taliban gave the remaining residents twenty-four-hour notice and then systematically burnt down the roofs off the buildings in town. They then forced the men who had been taken prisoner to uproot the vineyards surrounding the town and cut nearby trees into pieces to prevent people from rebuilding their homes.

Istalifis scattered. Some of the potters followed Massoud's forces to the Panjshir Valley, the one significant part of the country not under Taliban control.<sup>2</sup> Some crowded in with relatives or tried to rent homes for themselves in Kabul. The majority fled to refugee camps in Pakistan. The potters fared worse than some other groups during this period; it is not easy to set up a kiln and produce pots in a refugee camp. The historically lower-status weavers did better since their craft skills were more portable. This made potters more eager to return to their hometown. One potter described that he had ventured back to his family property during the Taliban years but had only found wolves roaming the streets. The town also collapsed politically. The elders had fled with their families, and the commanders had mostly joined other jihadi groups. The town remained thus deserted for three years.

## 2001 and after

The initial US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was greeted with optimism by the potters and Istalifis more generally. As Northern Alliance troops

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2 Istalif was not the only town damaged in the fighting. In neighbouring Qara Bagh district, seventy villages were reported as destroyed.

allied with the Americans and pushed towards Bagram in late October 2001, the Taliban forces that remained in the old hotel overlooking town fled. On 13 November 2001, the Taliban abandoned Kabul; slowly, Istalifis began returning to the area. This was part of a wider return of over 3.6 million refugees who were living outside of the country when the Taliban government fell (UNHCR 2001).

In the case of Istalif, often the young men returned first to assess the damage to the family homes and to begin rebuilding. As the homes became liveable, the older men, women, and children followed. Notably, however, many families left one or more sons living in Pakistan or in Kabul, a decision often described as an insurance policy in case the Taliban returned. For many Istalifis it meant that they had built up a national and transnational network of kin significantly more extensive than before the initial Taliban period.

Over the next five years, between 2002 and 2007, a series of internationally sponsored programmes helped the town rebuild. None of these were large, but Istalif was an appealing place for small non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to work early in the intervention, since it was easily accessible from Kabul and the elders in town were accustomed to dealing with foreigners. An American NGO that had connections with an Istalifi businessman who had moved to the US came and helped rebuild the bazaar. A South Korean group built a small hydroelectric generation plant on the river. Another large international organisation gave assistance for the rebuilding of some homes, and yet another NGO worked with potters to develop the craft industry and revitalise the town's reputation as a tourist destination. This aid was rarely coordinated and most townspeople we spoke with had trouble differentiating the projects from each other.

During this period, political power in the town remained divided: local commanders retained some of the influence that they had during the earlier years of war, but local maliks manoeuvred carefully to try and make sure that much of the development aid in the town flowed through them. For instance, when a programme sponsored by the government of Japan flew a group of potters to Japan to 'develop' their craft, the malik of the potters made sure he had a say as to who was chosen and that two of his sons were included.

Still, the amount of aid flowing to the town was limited, especially compared with other post-conflict settings with recent international interventions. A 2008 report, for instance, pointed out that 'Afghanistan received \$57 per capita, whilst Bosnia and East Timor received \$679 and \$233 per capita respectively' (Waldman 2008). The NGOs that did make it to the town also brought with them their own agendas that often did not align with the actual needs of the town. For instance, a women's empowerment group attempted to build a resource centre for female potters, complete with a sophisticated and expensive imported gas kiln. The group did not understand that, while wom-

en are important in the glazing and decorating of pots, they are not involved in the firing process; this task is the responsibility of husbands and brothers. Because the NGO insisted that its resource centre was a 'women only' space, the kiln went essentially unused. During this period, there was also only a sporadic military presence in the area: a French ISAF<sup>3</sup> patrol would pass through every few days and a small Afghan police force worked for the most part from the basement level of the now-heavily damaged hotel.

The politics of the first years following the US-led invasion were something we (Coburn 2011) described as 'masterly inactivity': the key political actors in town, including elders, commanders, and the district governor, agreed to an uneasy truce in which they neither worked together nor against each other, unless one actor was viewed by the others as trying to seize more than their share of the resources coming into town. Issues were resolved in more or less formal gatherings, often referred to as *shuras* or council meetings. There were some clear benefits to this: even though families returned at different times and the town's boundary walls had eroded, few land disputes erupted amongst returning families. Elders were mostly trusted to arbitrate any land concerns fairly, and this helped reduce conflict. Many in town were concerned that violence between families could quickly spiral out of control, so that everything was done to ensure that conflict was resolved at once.

This meant, however, that development projects struggled when they worked with specific elders or groups, as those not included would work to undermine it. The most glaring example of this was the paving of the road into town. Money for the project had been allocated by a government ministry, but local leaders repeatedly raised objections against the project. This was not because they did not want a new road; it was rather because the road was seen to benefit an elder with close ties to the government. The other leaders did not want Istalifis to perceive him as more powerful than them. This practice of undermining each other if one leader seemed to be too successful or to have better connections also explains why the town's main commander struggled when he ran for parliament in 2010: though his close allies wanted him to win, the vast majority of residents was concerned that him accruing so much political power would upset the balance in the town. At the same time, the tenuous balance helped suppress the violence: whilst Taliban and other insurgent attacks increased in neighbouring districts, they remained extremely rare in Istalif up to the end of the decade.

Throughout these years, political trust in the groups remained, but as development projects failed and individual leaders became wealthier, a growing gap between rich and poor began to undermine this trust. During this period, the politics of the town was very local. Local leaders met with and knew leaders in neighbouring districts, particularly Qara Bagh, just to

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3 The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was the military mission composed of NATO forces and its allies in Afghanistan.

the east, but the politics of these other areas had little impact in Istalif itself. This would change in the years that followed.

### The surge arrives

The political economy of Istalif, and Afghanistan more generally, began to shift after the election of Barack Obama, and from 2009 to the mid-2010s Istalif entered a new era. Obama had campaigned that the war in Afghanistan was a ‘good war’ and had argued that the resurgence of the Taliban was largely due to the Bush’s administration’s diversion of resources from the American war in Afghanistan to the American war in Iraq. Whereas then Vice President Joe Biden and others argued for a counterterrorism approach that would have created a light US footprint and would have kept aid and military resources separate, General David Petraeus and other generals convinced Obama to adopt a resource-heavy counterinsurgency approach (Woodward 2011). This meant the attempt to ‘win hearts and minds’ through rapid development projects, an approach that linked aid to insecurity. This meant that, from 2009, aid began to flow disproportionately to insecure areas in the south and the east. Small NGOs suddenly had their budgets increase ten-fold, as long as they were running large projects in key strategic areas – a criteria that did not apply to Istalif. Aid also flowed to government infrastructure that was thought to help reinforce the government position, such as building police stations and training the Afghan national army, further tying together the fates of the Afghan government and the US military (Suhrke 2011).

In the more insecure parts of the country, the US military had up to this point collaborated with commanders with questionable human rights records and limited fealty to the national government, to help support the US operations on the ground. Anand Gopal and others carefully traced how these deals and the resources the commanders gained access to through them had devastating consequences for Afghan civilians. Eventually, they undermined the national government and the international intervention more broadly (Gopal 2015; see also Malejacq 2019). Government officials were deeply connected with both commanders and contractors, building extensive patronage networks fuelled by donor funds.

For a town like Istalif in a fairly secure part of the country with a largely Tajik, anti-Taliban population, the change that took place was slower and was less connected to former warlords with access to resources from the US military. Rather, the change was connected to the resources that flowed to the region’s emerging business elite, often people with military and criminal ties. Little aid flowed directly to the town’s general population, beyond, perhaps, the rebuilding of the local elementary schools. As the international community increased its funding for projects that expanded the reach of the

Afghan state, the main road into town was finally paved, and a massive government compound that housed both the local police station and the district governor's office was built on the hill directly across from the old hotel. The road made transport to Kabul cheaper for goods and people. It was easier to get the grapes to the market, though farmers complained that it was not them but the merchants who transported the crops that benefited most. Similarly, the new government compound did not bring Istalifis closer to the government; in fact, elders were less likely to visit the district governor in his new compound than in his previous humbler and more accessible accommodation. The compound rather created a symbolic distance between the state and the town, with the compound's mirrored guard towers looking down on the main road coming into town from the south.

During these years, Istalifi leaders were more likely to engage with and support other political leaders in the region and in Kabul, particularly those who had business ties with the military or development groups. This was, in part, due to ease of access: it was now easier to get to and from the town, many leaders had relatives in Kabul who they could stay with for periods of time, and cell phones became a more regular means of communication. Families with homes in Pakistan would travel there more regularly. People seeking medical treatment would routinely go to India. In fact, we observed occasions when elders had difficulty convening a shura, for instance to welcome parliamentary candidates to town during election campaigns. In these instances, there was a flurry of phone calls to determine who was actually in Istalif at the time and who in Kabul, and whether they should wait for certain elders to return. The decrease in number and regularity of shura meetings eventually eroded trust in the town's leaders. This was also because local leaders increasingly saw their status as connected to the growing political-economic importance of more wealthy leaders from the wider Shomali region north of Istalif, not just the town itself (Coburn 2016).

Whilst development aid had a minimal impact on the town, other economic flows created by the American presence gained in importance for the town's political economy (Chandrasekaran 2013). This was particularly true for the money brought to the area through contracts with the international military. Some of these contracts were with companies that worked directly on Bagram Air Base or at one of the smaller, neighbouring bases, for instance doing construction. But the ripple effects of these contracts far exceeded the contract in itself: beyond those doing the actual construction, it included those supplying rocks for the foundation, those providing transportation, and those providing protection for the trucks as they were coming and going. In previous decades, young men from poorer families would have turned to the families of maliks and other leaders to ask for seasonal labour if they were in need. Now Istalifis were looking primarily to these military and development contracts to get work as laborers – a much more lucrative option

but one that did not generate the same level of social integration into the town's networks. This meant that young men might have more money available for their marriage but fewer connections with local elders who could arrange such relationships.

At each step of these internationally funded projects was an opportunity for profits, and businessmen and politicians developed dense, complicated networks of kin and allies to rely on for these contracts. Thus, where a US government or military official thought they had contracts with ten different companies on a construction project, they were often contracting from one single business network (Kaldor 2012; Coburn 2018). This greatly consolidated the importance of certain key figures, who could employ large numbers of workers or arrange for projects to be directed towards a specific community. In Istalif, few leaders had direct connections to the US military or to large-scale development projects. However, local leaders in neighbouring areas did, and so connections with these leaders became increasingly important for access to jobs on Bagram Air Base or to other economic opportunities. In some cases, neighbouring leaders were successful at providing the potters from Istalif access to international military bases where they could sell their wares at highly inflated prices to members of the international military.

Because of how these military and construction resources poured into the region, politicians, commanders, and businessmen from the districts to the east of Istalif and closer to Bagram grew in importance. One family that grew in importance across the region was that of Anwar Khan, a parliamentarian, and his brother Sher Shah, from the district of Qara Bagh, just east of Istalif (Coburn and Larson 2014). The two had deep connections with contractors supplying the US base at Bagram and were involved in a series of businesses in Kabul. They also had connections with development NGOs and facilitated several building projects in the area, most notably the paving of the highway from Kabul. Whilst the road allowed NGOs to access rural areas more readily, its building also undermined the legitimacy of the Afghan government who was supposed to be providing such resources.

These shifts were perceptible in a variety of political processes. One of the key changes was visible in the differences between the parliamentary elections of 2010 and those of 2018. In 2010, candidates from Istalif generated some local enthusiasm, though not enough to get a candidate elected to the provincial tally. By 2018, Istalifis realised both the limits of their own voting power and the role of more regional figures. Most decided to support regional candidates, such as Anwar Khan, instead of local ones like Istalif's most prominent local commander who had run and lost in 2010.

Perhaps linked to Istalifis increasingly looking to more regional political leaders for support, they were also more disillusioned by politics in general and by the ability of their own leaders to generate substantive change in Istalif more specifically. School and healthcare facilities in the town remained

poor, even as more and more wealthy Kabulis built homes in the area. In particular the wealth of Anwar Khan, who built a large compound in Qara Bagh in addition to his spacious residence in Kabul, stood in stark contrast to the simple homes of most Istalifis. It became more common in the bazaar to hear Istalifis complain about national-level political figures building lavish homes in Kabul and abroad, and all this inequity further undermined the international approach that aimed to ‘win hearts and minds’ through military-sponsored development projects. Beyond Istalif, research from this time shows how attempts to use aid as a stabilising force in reality fuelled conflict and led to less effective aid outcomes (Fishstein and Wilder 2012). Other studies linked corruption, stimulated by international funds, with poor governance (Suhrke 2011; Gopal 2015). Whilst Istalifis did not always directly experience the corruption and instability that fuelled the conflict in other parts of the country, they were certainly aware of it, and it reshaped their political views. For instance, whilst Istalif did not experience drone attacks or night raids that caused so much damage in other parts of the country (one could occasionally catch sight of a drone flying by), reports of drone strikes and rumours, for instance of the desecration of Korans at Bagram Air Base, eroded Istalifi confidence in the Afghan government and made them resentful of the international military presence that they had previously supported (Guster-son 2016; Tahir 2017). It also made them suspicious of their own leaders. Even if the latter might not have been benefiting directly from the money and violence of the intervention, Istalifis certainly saw them moving in elite circles with more important figures who were.

Simultaneously, security in the districts around Istalif deteriorated significantly. Several of the Pashtun villages on the road to Kabul were rumoured to have sympathies with the Taliban. Locals said that the Taliban would traverse the area at night, moving down from the mountains to plant roadside bombs in the areas around Bagram. Such practices were common across the country. In her work on the ways in which communities negotiate survival with insurgency, Ashley Jackson (2021: 5) states: ‘Neutrality is nigh on impossible. [...] For civilians, survival is often a question of simultaneously navigating the demands of both the government and insurgency.’ For instance, several of the elders from towns around Istalif were said to have made informal arrangements with the Taliban: the Taliban could pass through their towns at night and no one would report them; in exchange, the Taliban would not conduct any attacks in the area. All of this speaks to the ways in which Taliban fighters, even when not from the local area, relied on local connections. This was in stark contrast to the international narratives about the Taliban which described them as outsiders looking to support global terrorism (Strick van Linschoten and Kuehn 2012, 2018; Giustozzi 2019). The fact, however, that neither the Afghan government nor local elders could

really keep the Taliban out of the district further eroded Istalifi trust in their leaders ever more.

The changing security conditions made travel to and from Istalif more difficult and slowed the number of local tourists visiting the town on Fridays. (International tourism to the area had virtually stopped by 2013.) This had shifted the work of the potters in particular, who in the early 2000s had still largely supplied domestic and international tourists in Istalif. From 2013, an increasing percentage of their pots was sold in shops in Kabul and along the road between Kabul and Bagram.

Whilst it became more dangerous to travel to Istalif, the digital technology meant that Istalifis were ever more connected to the outside world. Cell phones went from rare with spotty coverage to ubiquitous, enabling Istalifis to access family and friends in Kabul and abroad through Facebook and various other apps. The town was increasingly connected to a diverse national and international media through Afghanistan's growing television industry (Falke 2014; Osman 2020). Thus, as the Taliban began to close in on Kabul in the summer of 2021, Istalifis were tracking the political decline of the Ghani government step by step.

### The late days of the Islamic Republic

In the late 2010s and early 2020s, the orchards and vineyards of Istalif still produced valuable crops, but some of the more powerful families had bought up more and more land, increasing the gap between landowners and those that worked the orchards. Over the past decade, there had not been much development of other industries in Istalif itself, though there was in the valley below, closer to Bagram. As with many other rural parts of Afghanistan, young men looked to travel to Kabul or, better, abroad to a Gulf country or the West, to find work and send money home. Many of those that did not have the connections to make it to the West or the money to pay a trafficker ended up working in Pakistan or Iran. Most extended families had at least one young male member working abroad.

Whilst security in Istalif itself was never particularly bad, the Pash-tun villages on the road linking the town with the main highway became increasingly insecure. There were multiple bombings in the area, usually in the shape of improvised roadside bombs. One damaged the neighbouring district centre of Qara Bagh, another targeted electricity pylons on the line from Central Asia to Kabul, and still another targeted a local parliamentary candidate. When we conducted interviews in the area, our interlocutors often described these attacks as 'Taliban attacks'; but in nearly every case further research revealed additional motivations tied to the local political situation in the area and some of the local politicians who had benefited most from the presence of the US troops. In some cases, there were rivalries between

local commanders competing for business. In another case the target was the district governor of the neighbouring district whom locals believed had not been cooperative enough with some of the commanders with deeper links to Bagram Air Base.

Though these attacks disrupted local life, many pointed out that some of the commanders working with the US military benefited from them, even when they themselves were the targets. Anwar Khan and others used the attacks as an excuse to build up their own small militias, which were ‘providing them with security’. And, for others who had business with Bagram or other international military installations, increased insecurity also provided an opportunity to charge more. As a result, rumours started to circulate that these ‘Taliban attacks’ were staged by figures who were supposed to be helping the Afghan government and the international community fight against the Taliban (Coburn 2016). As a result, suspicion and mistrust of the elite grew further.

While there were still few attacks within Istalif itself, the insecurity in the general area meant that accessing the town became more difficult, particularly for non-residents. This made international NGOs less likely to work with the town, and farmers had more difficulty getting their crops to market. Over the decade of 2010–2020, more and more shops in the Istalif bazaar closed. As the number of visitors decreased, potters and farmers were more likely to rely on wholesalers to transport their goods to Kabul. Such deals required good connections and a cell phone. Shops, which had been places where young men gathered, became unnecessary expenses.

The shift in security conditions and the ineffectiveness of aid also undermined local governance structures: since local commanders were not seen as effective against the insecurity created by the Taliban and, in fact, seemed to be the actual targets of attacks, their legitimacy further eroded. Simultaneously, maliks, who had previously been seen as effective interlocutors with government officials and the international military, were now seen as ineffective at best. This political change would speed up significantly in August 2021.

### The new Taliban

In the days following the collapse of the Ghani government on 15 August 2021, Istalifis, like many communities with longstanding opposition to the Taliban, grew concerned about the potential for attacks of retribution. A small force of approximately ten Taliban fighters arrived on the day that the government in Kabul fell and took control of the district compound without a fight. (Interestingly, this was the opposite of what had happened in 2001 when the Taliban left the town without a fight, leaving it to the returning townspeople.) Almost all residents boarded up their homes and fled, mostly

south to Kabul, where they moved in with relatives. The only ones that remained were the poorest who could not afford to stay alive in Kabul with its high prices.

While tens of thousands of Afghans rushed to Kabul airport where the US and other international militaries eventually evacuated more than 125,000 Afghans who had supported the international presence, most Istalifis did not have the connections necessary to get inside the airport. The only exceptions were some of the potters who had been working for an international NGO and managed to leave the country during the evacuation. One more prominent family ended up in Eastern Europe with a group of evacuated Afghans who did not qualify for US visas.

In the days following the republic's collapse, Panjshir Valley was again a holdout against the Taliban, but after a series of Taliban offenses, even this area fell mostly under Taliban control. Over the ensuing weeks, the Taliban cleared some of the primarily Tajik villages on the Shomali Plain, particularly near Bagram Air Base, forcing residents to leave. The reason for this was rumoured to be to prevent resistance groups from Panjshir heading south and being harboured by local community members.

Writing this six months after the return of the Taliban, it is far from clear what impact all these shifts will have on the local politics in Istalif, but the one thing that is clear is that the changes will be drastic. Most of the key leaders are no longer in the town. Some of the commanders who had been associated with the resistance forces in Panjshir have fled the country. Several are said to be in Istanbul, an emerging centre for the Taliban opposition in exile. Others fled to Kabul and are attempting to keep a low profile.

In the months since 15 August 2021, the new Taliban government has consolidated power, and some Istalifis have become less fearful of Taliban reprisals. The Taliban government in Istalif has been somewhat unstable, not because of local resistance but because of discord amongst the Taliban themselves. In Kabul factions around the more extreme Haqqani network have come into conflict with more moderate sections of the Taliban, whilst dozens of other more minor groups struggle to divide up the governance of the country. This has led to the replacement of the Taliban commander ruling over Istalif, though this has not changed much for local Istalifis. The lack of reprisal attacks and the economic pressures have led Istalifis to trickle back into town. While they may be able to continue to grow crops to support their families, the wider political and economic collapse of the town is remarkable.

### An uncertain future

In many ways Istalif should have benefited more from twenty years of international intervention than any other part of the country: it was an area that was historically wealthy and well connected; it had both agriculture and a lo-

cal craft industry; and it managed to avoid serious internal political conflicts. But the majority of Istalifis benefited only marginally from the last twenty years of war and intervention. Certain individuals and families, particularly those with connections to key commanders and political figures, did expand their wealth, but this happened unevenly across the resident population. For the most part, it was the most successful families who were able to send their sons to Kabul or abroad to find work. Aspects of the intervention that the international community likes to emphasise, such as elections and women's rights programmes, ultimately had hardly an impact on Istalif.

This was, to a large extent, due to the rather ambiguous and confused approach to imperialism by the American government. While the US government repeatedly emphasised that its forces were in Afghanistan to eliminate the terrorist threat to Americans, the actions of the international community, which during the surge years was very much led by the US government, did not line up with these official statements. Programmes supported by US government dollars did support nation-building and development projects in and around Istalif, but they were rarely well coordinated, and funds were routinely diverted to the regional ruling elite.

The attempts by the international community to democratise and 'develop' towns like Istalif did little to change the town materially. Instead, it was the money pouring into the area, particularly from military contracts, that made the most difference to the socio-economic situation of the area. The money delegitimised local leaders and most benefited a regional elite that blended business with work supporting the international military. Istalif became physically closer to Kabul with the paving of the new road, but the distance between Istalifis and the elite they saw posting on Facebook increased.

Perhaps most problematic for the long-term future of the town, however, is the fact that the changing socio-economic situation of the area means that trust has eroded between and within groups. While the town struggled to rebuild after the first Taliban period, there was at least little violence, and most residents shared the goal of rebuilding the town. It seems unlikely that such unity could be achieved quickly again, even if the Taliban government collapsed.

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