



Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, January 25, 2023

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Data Cutoff: January 25, 2023, at 10 a.m.

Key Takeaways:

Somalia. Al Shabaab continued a wave of suicide attacks against Somali forces, including its first major tactical victory in central Somalia, where it overran a base used by US-trained special forces. These attacks are retaliation against a months-long Somali Federal Government (SFG)–led effort to oust al Shabaab from its positions in central Somalia. The SFG may open a second front against al Shabaab in southern Somalia, but this effort faces more hurdles than the central Somalia campaign.

Sahel. Malign actors are exploiting security vacuums left by the French withdrawal from Mali and Burkina Faso. Al Qaeda–affiliated Jama’*a* Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM) has emerged as the only viable security partner for Tuareg communities facing Islamic State violence in northeastern Mali. This situation forces communities to partner with JNIM in self-defense, solidifying the groups’ influence across northeastern Mali. JNIM is also active in Burkina Faso, where the country’s military leaders recently ended a military deal with France and are seeking partnership with the Russian Wagner Group. Wagner’s presence will increase violence against Burkinabe civilians, to the benefit of Salafi-jihadi groups—as it has in Mali since Wagner arrived in 2021.

Pakistan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is increasingly taking control over terrain in Pakistan since ending a cease-fire with the government in November 2022. The TTP announced organizational changes in December 2022 to facilitate increased governance activities. TTP militants also attempted to collect taxes in Pakistan for the first time in over a year in late January.

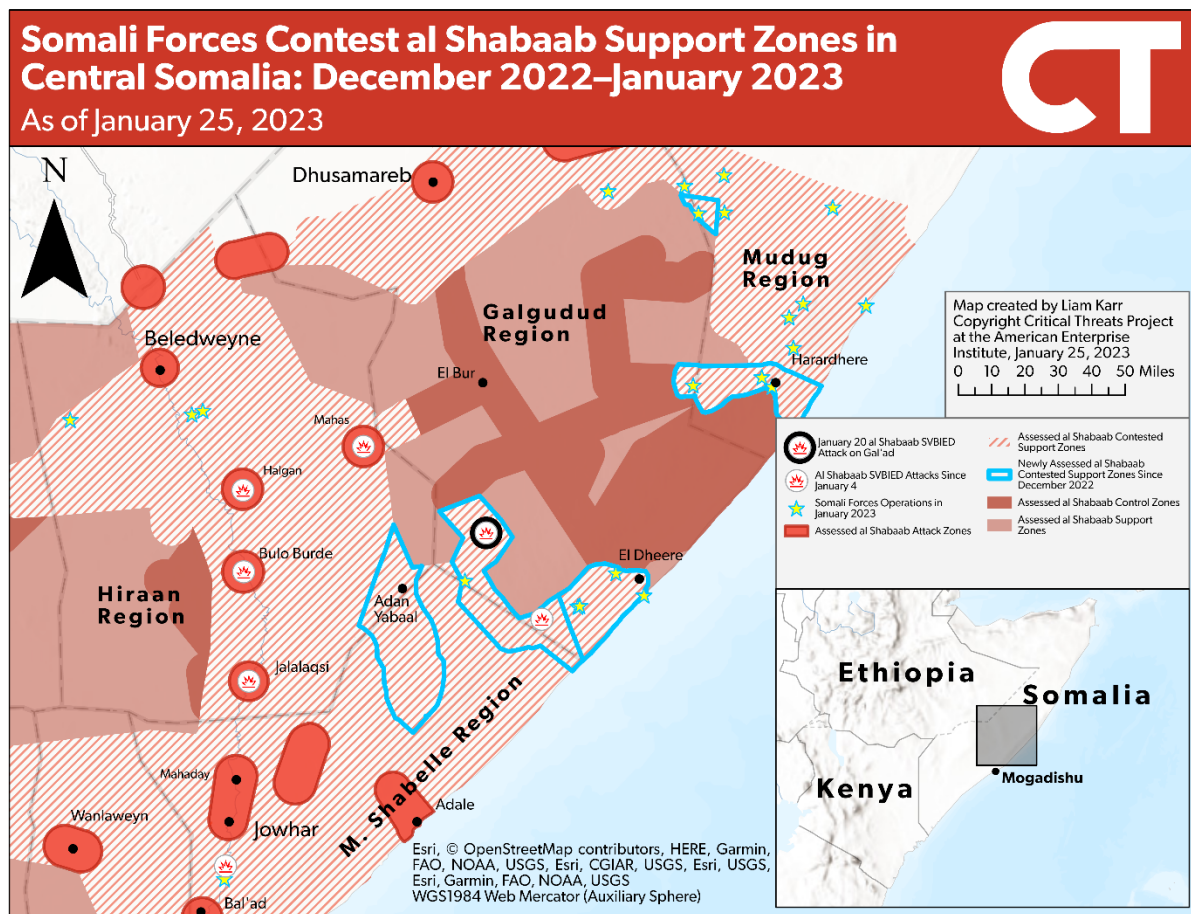
Assessments:

Somalia. Al Shabaab continued a wave of suicide attacks against the SFG in retaliation for the ongoing SFG-led offensive in central Somalia. The group notched this counteroffensive’s first major tactical success on January 20, overrunning a Somali base in the Galgudud region.¹ This attack included the group’s seventh use of a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device since January 4.² The attack targeted a US-trained Danab special forces forward operating base in Gal’ad, a key crossroads town linking two district capitals: El Dheere, which SFG forces recently recaptured, and El Bur, which al Shabaab controls. The al Shabaab attack likely aimed to prevent further SFG advances towards El Bur. Somali officials claimed to repel the attack with US drone support, but Somali troops officially withdrew toward the Galgudud–Middle Shabelle regional border on January 21, indicating Somali forces sustained significant losses and could not hold the base.³ US-supported Somali forces in

neighboring Mudug region have since intensified efforts to clear al Shabaab havens in the Harardhere district to prevent al Shabaab from launching a similar attack on Harardhere town.⁴

Al Shabaab also launched a suicide attack targeting the mayor's headquarters in Mogadishu on January 22.⁵ The group has besieged several high-value targets in Mogadishu since September as part of another campaign in retaliation for the central Somalia offensive.⁶

Figure 1. Somali Forces Contest al Shabaab Support Zones in Central Somalia



Source: Liam Karr.

The SFG may open a second front against al Shabaab in southern Somalia. President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud and officials in South West State (SWS) touted plans to escalate operations on January 18.⁷ The statements came amid several days of reconciliation meetings between the incumbent SWS president and SWS opposition groups.⁸ This timing indicates the various stakeholders may have reached an agreement that will free more security forces and clan militias to participate in an offensive against al Shabaab. Somali federal and state forces also seized a crossroads town in the Lower Jubba region on January 21, claiming they will use it as a launching pad for future operations in Lower Jubba's Afmadow district.⁹ The SFG may have deployed Danab special forces and Eritrean-trained special forces to the area, which further indicates impending offensive operations.¹⁰ If true, this would be the first time the SFG has used its new Eritrea-trained soldiers since they began returning to Somalia in December 2022 after a highly controversial multiyear training mission.¹¹

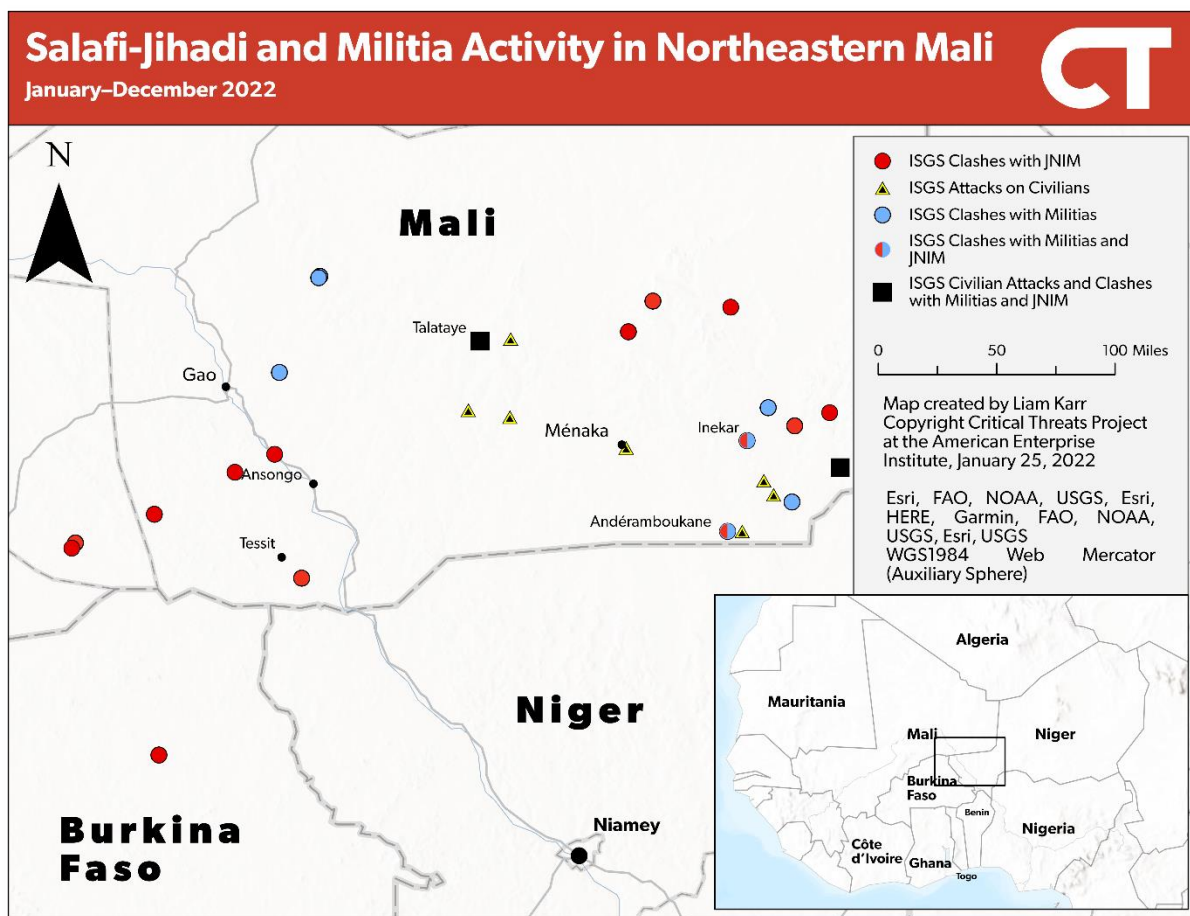
Clan dynamics in southern Somalia could limit the scope and success of an offensive. Cooperation between the federal government, local militias, and civilians has underpinned the SFG's advances in central Somalia. This relationship stems from several factors, including specific al Shabaab attacks that alienated these clans and President Mohamud's clan ties to the area.¹² The absence of these

factors makes local support less assured in southern Somalia. The lack of local support could limit the reach of a southern Somalia offensive. It could also decrease the government’s ability to sustain its presence in rural areas in the absence of local militias’ intelligence, communications, and military support.¹³

Sahel. Al Qaeda–affiliated militants are capitalizing on the security vacuum in northeastern Mali to expand and strengthen their ties with vulnerable communities. Several Daoussak Tuareg leaders from northeastern Mali’s Ménaka region pledged allegiance to JNIM, al Qaeda’s branch in the Sahel, on January 21.¹⁴ The pledges formalized a relationship that has grown since the 2022 French withdrawal. Fighters from the Islamic State Greater Sahara Province (ISGS) have regularly attacked Daoussak communities for several years. JNIM had previously attempted to negotiate with ISGS on behalf of the Daoussak in 2017, but Daoussak militias began working more closely with French forces that were conducting counter-ISGS operations.¹⁵ The 2022 French drawdown allowed ISGS to escalate retaliatory massacres against now-vulnerable Daoussak communities.¹⁶

JNIM moved to present itself as a security partner and rekindle its ties with Daoussak communities as ISGS attacks approached traditionally JNIM-dominated areas of Ménaka throughout 2022.¹⁷ JNIM and Daoussak militia groups eventually launched likely coordinated offensives into ISGS-dominated areas of Ménaka that led to widespread fighting, especially between JNIM and ISGS, in late 2022.¹⁸

Figure 2. Salafi-Jihadi and Militia Activity in Northeastern Mali



Source: Liam Karr.

The recent Tuareg leader pledges to JNIM underscore that JNIM will increase its influence across northeastern Mali as it emerges as the only viable security partner for many northeastern communities. The pledges reportedly took place in Inekar, which is much further south in the Ménaka

region than JNIM's prior strongholds.¹⁹ JNIM Emir Iyad ag Ghali was also present during the pledges and had reportedly traveled around the Ménaka region for several weeks prior.²⁰ Ag Ghali's travel highlights JNIM's increased freedom of movement since the end of the French Operation Barkhane.

Anti-French juntas ruling Mali and Burkina Faso pursue partnerships with Russian Wagner Group mercenaries. The juntas seek out Wagner to provide regime security and support without conditions, respond to widespread anti-French sentiment, and nominally replace Western support that is legally and politically constrained after military coups.²¹ Wagner and Russia benefit economically from access to natural resources, markets for weapons, and opportunities to evade sanctions.²²

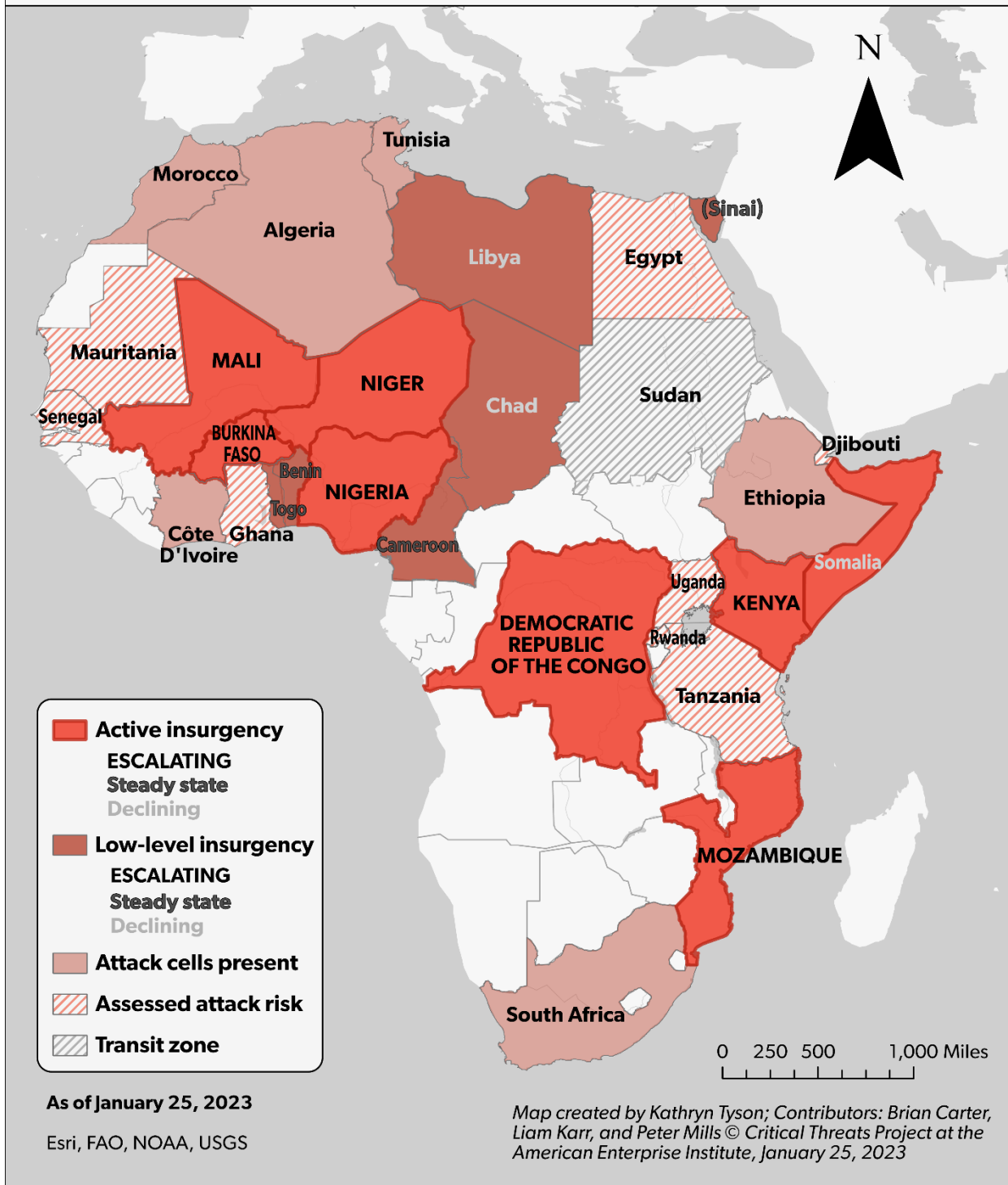
Wagner Group arrived in Mali in November 2021 and has deployed to several regions alongside Malian troops in 2022.²³ Wagner has increased the amount of violence against civilians in the country, including committing collective punishment massacres in numerous villages.²⁴ These human rights abuses provide Salafi-jihadi groups with a free recruitment tool by driving vulnerable citizens to partner with the militants for protection.²⁵

Wagner is now prepared to enter Burkina Faso in the coming months and may have already sent some personnel to the country in late December 2022.²⁶ The Burkinabe junta renounced its military agreement with the French on January 18, giving the nearly 400 French soldiers in the country one month to withdraw.²⁷ France was already reportedly planning to announce a drawdown beginning in February, but the junta's move to expedite their departure could allow it to more quickly bring Wagner mercenaries into the country.²⁸ Wagner will likely increase violence against Burkinabe civilians to the benefit of Salafi-jihadi groups, much like it has in Mali.

Figure 3. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

As of January 2023

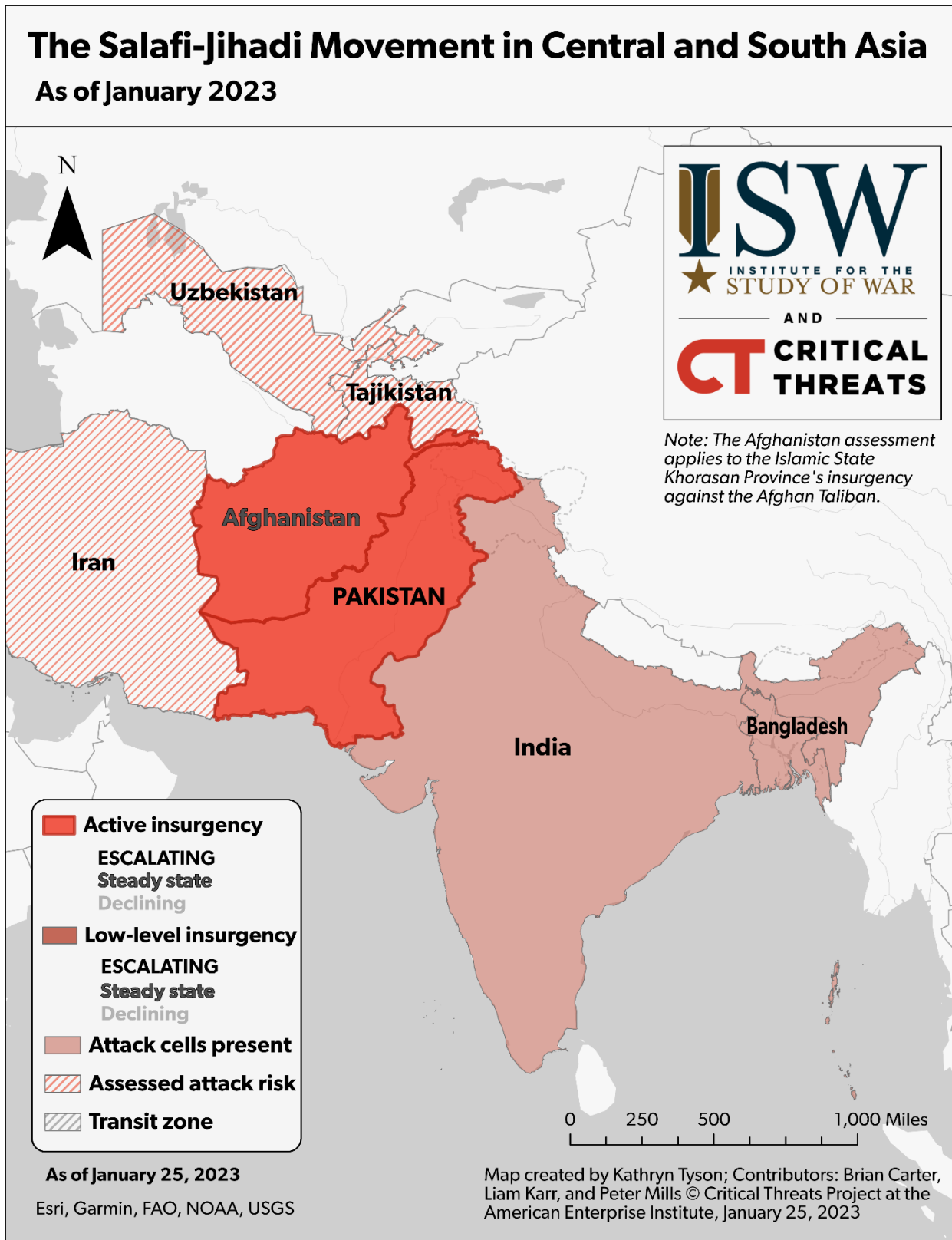


Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Pakistan. The TTP is increasingly taking de facto control over terrain in Pakistan since it ended a cease-fire with the Pakistani government in November 2022. The TTP began efforts to exert control over populations before ending the cease-fire and has escalated these efforts since, including making organizational changes to facilitate a governance effort. The TTP announced new regional appointments for TTP leaders across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in northwestern Pakistan in

February 2022.²⁹ The TTP announced appointments for new TTP ministries in December 2022, including ministries for politics, judiciary affairs, and education, indicating the TTP seeks to expand and formalize its governing structures.³⁰ The TTP also attempted to collect taxes from civilians in Yarak in northwestern Pakistan on January 24 for the first time in over a year, signaling an increasingly bold expansion of its extortion activities.³¹

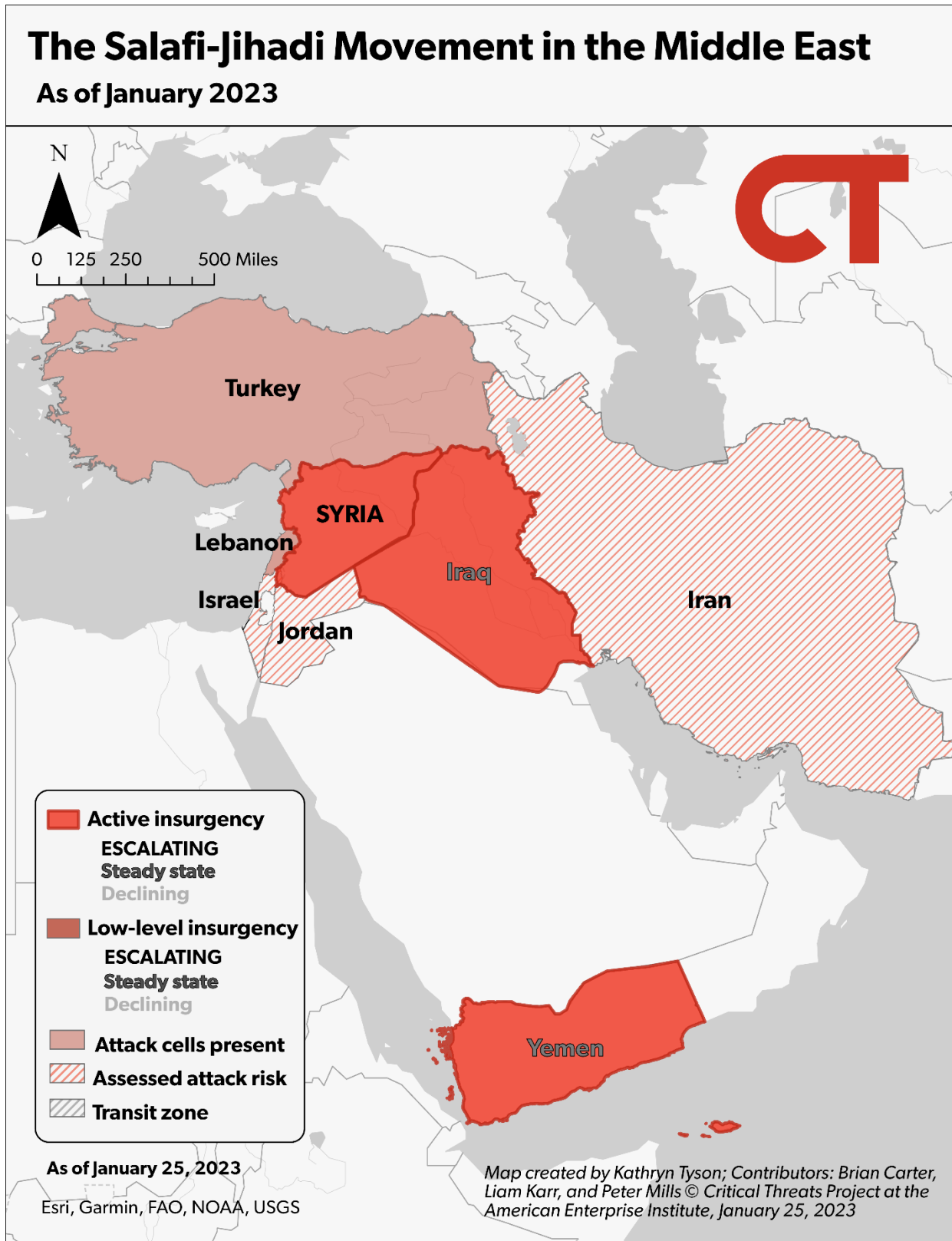
Figure 4. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Middle East. There have been no significant updates from this region in the past week.

Figure 5. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in the Middle East



Source:

Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Afghanistan: A Jamestown Foundation report by Zafar Iqbal Yousafzai claimed China is providing Blowfish unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAV) to the Taliban government.³² The Blowfish A1 is a helicopter UCAV that carries a small payload of 12 kilograms, equivalent to several small mortar rounds, and is reportedly capable of operating autonomously or under operator control. The Critical Threats Project and Institute for the Study of War have not confirmed that the Taliban have acquired these drones or their potential source. The Taliban government has prioritized investing in maintaining its air force capability. China may have decided to supply this equipment to the Taliban government following recent Islamic State Khorasan Province attacks targeting Chinese nationals and assets in Afghanistan.

Pakistan: Sunni sectarian militant group Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) attacked in Pakistan on January 22 for the first time since 2016.³³ An unspecified number of LeJ militants fired on Pakistani paramilitary forces and killed two officials in Mastung city in Balochistan province in southwestern Pakistan, within the group's historical area of operations.³⁴ The attack comes after LeJ released a statement announcing the group's reemergence and threatening attacks in September 2022.³⁵

¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-january-20-2023>

² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-january-18-2023>

³ <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/35119/somali-us-forces-engage-insurgents-in-support-of-the-federal-government-of-somalia>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-january-20-2023>; <https://www.caasimada.net/xog-ciidamada-dowladda-oo-isaga-soo-baxay-degmada-galcad>

⁴ <https://www.radiodalsan.com/wararka-idaacadda/madaxweyne-qoorqoor-iyo-saraakiisha-ciidamada-oo-kulan-ka-yeeshay-amniga-xarardheere>; <https://www.caasimada.net/weerar-lagu-qaaday-saldhig-ay-ku-sugnaayeen-shabaab-oo-xubno-badan-lagu-dilay>; <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/35122/somali-us-forces-engage-insurgents-in-support-of-the-federal-government-of-somalia>; <https://twitter.com/sntvnews1/status/1618202637291388938?s=20&t=ah7KL9t79bJBvWpLRjPY5g>

⁵ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-january-23-2023>

⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/al-qaeda-global-tracker/salafi-jihadi-global-tracker-al-shabaab-besieges-hotel-near-somali-presidential-complex>; <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-hayat-hotel-siege-challenges-somali-federal-governments-counterterrorism-strategy>

⁷ <https://www.caasimada.net/xasan-sheekh-oo-shaaciye-halka-laga-billaabayo-wajiga-labaad-ee-dagaalka-shabaab>; <https://radiorisaala.com/lafta-gareen-oo-sheegay-in-bil-gudaheed-al-shabaab-uga-saarayaan-degaannada-koofur-galbeed>

⁸ <https://puntlandpost.net/2023/01/21/koonfur-galbeed-oo-diiday-qorshayaal-uu-madaxweyne-xasan-sheekh-ula-tegay>; <https://www.caasimada.net/sawirro-xasan-oo-kulan-gaar-ah-la-yeeshay-golaha-wasiirada-k-galbeed-farayna-laba-arrin>; <https://www.caasimada.net/daawo-afhayeenka-odayaasha-k-galbeed-oo-baaq-soo-saaray-kadib-goankii-laftagareen>

⁹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/gulf-of-aden-security-review/gulf-of-aden-security-review-january-23-2023>

¹⁰ <https://www.caasimada.net/xog-kun-ka-mid-ah-askarta-lagu-soo-tababaray-dalka-eritrea-oo-la-geynayo>; <https://radiorisaala.com/faah-faahin-kasoo-baxeysa-dagaal-ka-dhacay-duleedka-magaalada-kismaayo>

¹¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/first-batch-of-somali-troops-trained-in-eritrea-arrives-home-/6885944.html>

¹² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-clan-uprising-bolsters-anti-al-shabaab-offensive-in-central-somalia>

¹³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-january-18-2023>

¹⁴ SITE Intelligence Group, "JNIM Photo Report Displays Local Malian Tribes Pledging Allegiance to Group in Ménaka," January 23, 2023, available by subscription at www.siteintelgroup.com

¹⁵ <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-end-of-the-sahelian-anomaly-how-the-global-conflict-between-the-islamic-state-and-al-qaida-finally-came-to-west-africa>; <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/02/tuareg-militias-battle-islamic-state-loyal-militants-in-northern-mali.php>

¹⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/27/mali-coordinated-massacres-islamist-armed-groups>

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1547626334817423360?s=20&t=Pw-ALqrlI0oF3RHm8cMn_w;

https://twitter.com/SimNasr/status/1547669737559117825?s=20&t=Pw-ALqrlI0oF3RHm8cMn_w

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1603644029098684416?s=20&t=cTxUfhQ_1G2xvGUOrmUzPA; <https://maliactu.net/mali-5-terroristes-neutralises-dans-un-combat-avec-le-msa-d-a-tamalat-nord>;

https://twitter.com/Mont_Marcus_G/status/1583820713060106242; SITE Intelligence Group, "JNIM Claims Killing 112 IS Fighters in Infographic Covering December 2022 Ops," January 5, 2023, available by subscription at www.siteintelgroup.com

¹⁹ <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230123-mali-iyad-ag-ghaly-recrute-et-s-affiche-dans-la-r%C3%A9gion-de-m%C3%A9naka>

²⁰ <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230123-mali-iyad-ag-ghaly-recrute-et-s-affiche-dans-la-r%C3%A9gion-de-m%C3%A9naka>

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- ²² <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/03/the-wagner-groups-playbook-in-africa-mali>
- ²³ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-wagner-group-deployment-to-mali-threatens-counterterrorism-efforts>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/german-troops-spot-russian-forces-mali-french-pull-out-document-2022-08-16>
- ²⁴ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>
- ²⁵ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>; <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/how-the-wagner-group-is-aggravating-the-jihadi-threat-in-the-sahel>
- ²⁶ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1406554/politique/des-mercenaires-de-wagner-ont-ils-debarque-au-burkina-faso>; <https://www.voanews.com/a/ghana-says-burkina-faso-paid-russian-mercenaries-with-mine-/6878119.html>; <https://t.me/rybar/42195>
- ²⁷ <https://www.politico.eu/article/jean-emmanuel-ouedraogo-burkina-faso-france-french-troops-withdrawal>
- ²⁸ <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2023/01/04/french-diplomatic-operations-face-turbulent-times-in-ouagadougou,109878443-art>
- ²⁹ <https://twitter.com/ihsantipu/status/1496167694353190915?s=21>
- ³⁰ <https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1608885785985683457>
- ³¹ <https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1617766519764832256>; <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-taliban-return-extortion/32044957.html>; <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1617787035443691520>
- ³² <https://jamestown.org/program/after-the-kabul-hotel-attack-the-taliban-and-china-confront-security-challenges-in-afghanistan>
- ³³ <https://twitter.com/lftikharFirdous/status/1617242170125172737>
- ³⁴ <https://twitter.com/ShabbirTuri/status/1617236041953579008>
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