



Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, February 22, 2023

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Data Cutoff: February 22, 2023, at 10 a.m.

Key Takeaways:

Iraq. The Iraqi Security Forces' (ISF) inability to defeat ISIS in the northern Baghdad Belts could allow ISIS to attack Baghdad itself. An ISIS attack against Baghdad would be a propaganda boon for the group, while possibly triggering sectarian violence and ISF command changes that could improve the group's position. The level of ISF pressure on ISIS in the northern Baghdad Belts is likely sufficient to disrupt ISIS attacks against Baghdad, though ISIS is attempting to undermine ISF cohesion in the area. ISF is unlikely to defeat ISIS without a major operation involving capable Iraqi Army forces. ISIS will continue to be able to resupply its attack cells and attack ISF forces in the northern Belts without a major counter-ISIS operation.

Sahel. Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM) is likely consolidating control over rural areas of southeastern Burkina Faso. The group is likely using these expanded havens to increase activity in neighboring regions of Burkina Faso and the littoral states. A Burkinabe overemphasis on military solutions without successfully addressing underlying social issues risks backfiring, inflaming local tensions that feed JNIM recruitment in the area.

Pakistan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) conducted its most deadly attack in Karachi in southeastern Pakistan since 2016, indicating an expansion of TTP attack zones and an increase in TTP capabilities in Karachi. Pakistani security forces will likely conduct counter-TTP operations in Karachi in the near term. Pakistan could strike TTP militants in Afghanistan in a less likely scenario. Pakistan continues to seek engagement with the Afghan Taliban on terrorism-related issues, and a Pakistani attack in Afghanistan could undermine discussions between the two sides.

Assessments:

Iraq. The ISF inability to permanently dislodge ISIS from the northern Baghdad Belts could allow ISIS to use these areas to launch attacks into Baghdad. The Baghdad Belts are a series of suburban areas around Baghdad that ISIS and its predecessors have used to build the capabilities necessary to launch major attacks into the city.¹ The current level of ISF pressure on ISIS in Tarmiyah, a principal

town in the northern Belts, likely remains sufficient to prevent an attack on Baghdad. However, recent attacks near Tarmiyah indicate ISIS's continued ability to logistically support attack cells in the Baghdad Belts that almost certainly aim to attack the city.² The last major ISIS attack in Baghdad was in July 2021, when a suicide bomber detonated his suicide vest in Baghdad's Sadr City, killing 35.³

ISIS attacks since December 2022 in Tarmiyah targeted leadership in local Iraqi army and Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) units and staged complex ambushes that could undermine ISF unit cohesion and discourage aggressive counterterrorism over the long term.⁴ ISIS used car bombs and improvised explosive devices to eliminate regiment- and battalion-level leadership, indicating an ability to collect and exploit sufficient intelligence to carry out targeted assassinations.⁵ Other ISIS assassinations have targeted lower-level Iraqi army soldiers.⁶ ISIS also conducted a tactically adept ambush on January 3 that intentionally drew federal police into kill zones before springing a trap.⁷ Tactically adept ambushes suggest a more proficient cell in Tarmiyah relative to elsewhere in Iraq. CTP does not assess ISF units in Tarmiyah are losing cohesion at present.

ISIS likely sustains its forces in Tarmiyah and other northern Baghdad Belts through ground lines of communication running into Tarmiyah from the north through terrain held by Iran-backed PMF forces.⁸ These areas are long-standing ISIS supply lines running from Ninewa province through Kirkuk province and the Hamrin Mountains into Diyala province and the northern Baghdad Belts.⁹

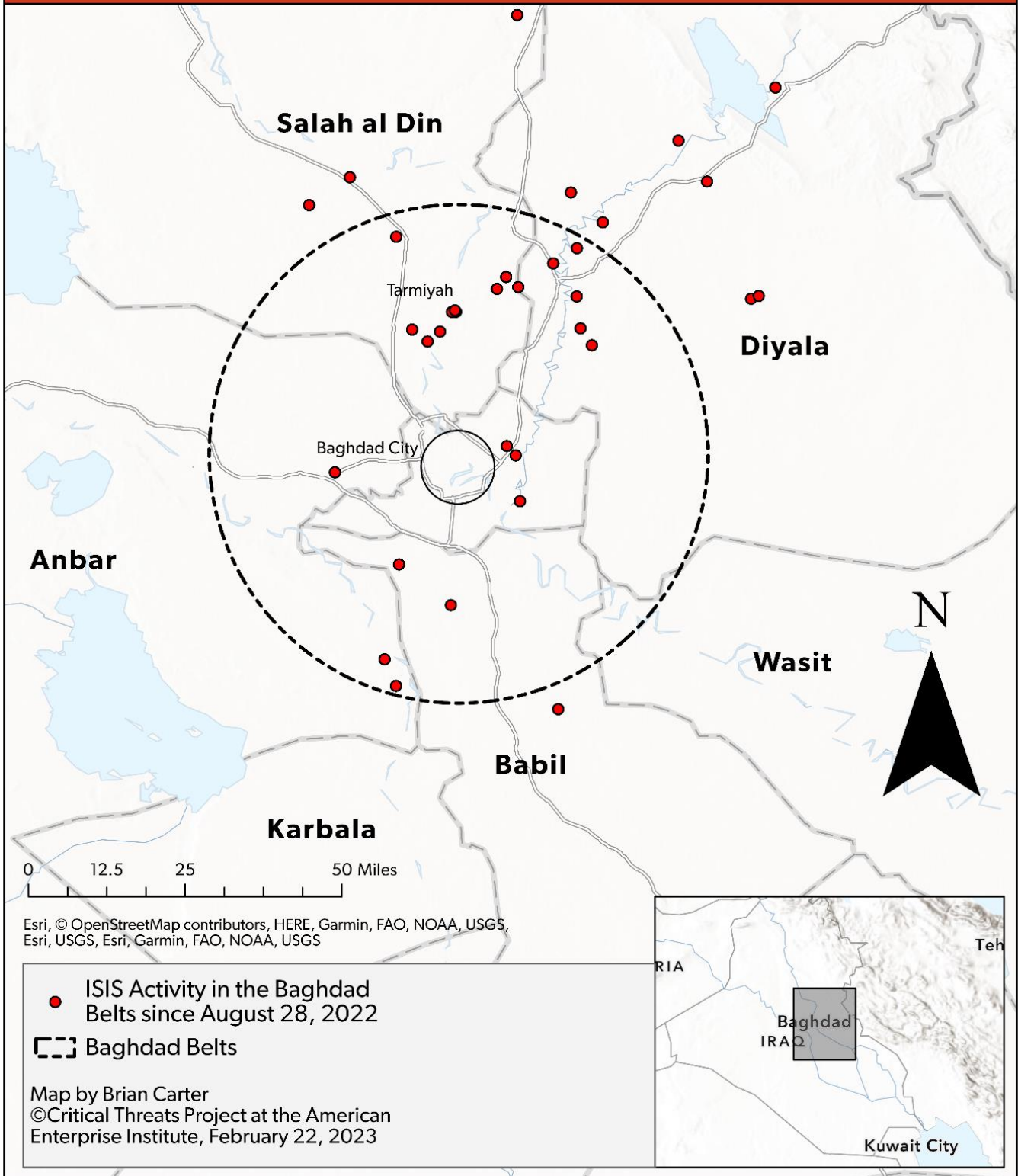
An ISIS attack against Baghdad from Tarmiyah would be a propaganda boon for the organization and could result in arbitrary retribution against local Sunni populations by Iran-backed militias.¹⁰ A major suicide attack in Baghdad may reinvigorate ISIS supporters in Iraq, especially if attacks could be sustained. The attack would also help the group maintain its image of an effective insurgency after numerous setbacks at the hands of the ISF.

The Iraqi government could reshuffle key military leadership in Baghdad to satisfy popular pressure in response to a major attack. Former Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi replaced the leaders of a number of security services in Baghdad after an attack in January 2021.¹¹ The new prime minister, whose government is heavily influenced by Iran-backed militias, could choose to replace the current leadership with less-effective and pro-Iran military leaders. The government already replaced effective Iraqi National Intelligence Service officials with personnel backed by Iran.¹² The removal of effective leadership could undermine counter-ISIS operations and exacerbate the security situation in Baghdad and the Baghdad Belts.¹³ A bias towards appointing commanders close to political leadership could undermine confidence in ISF officers and have a deleterious effect on unit cohesion.

Figure 1. ISIS Activity in the Baghdad Belts

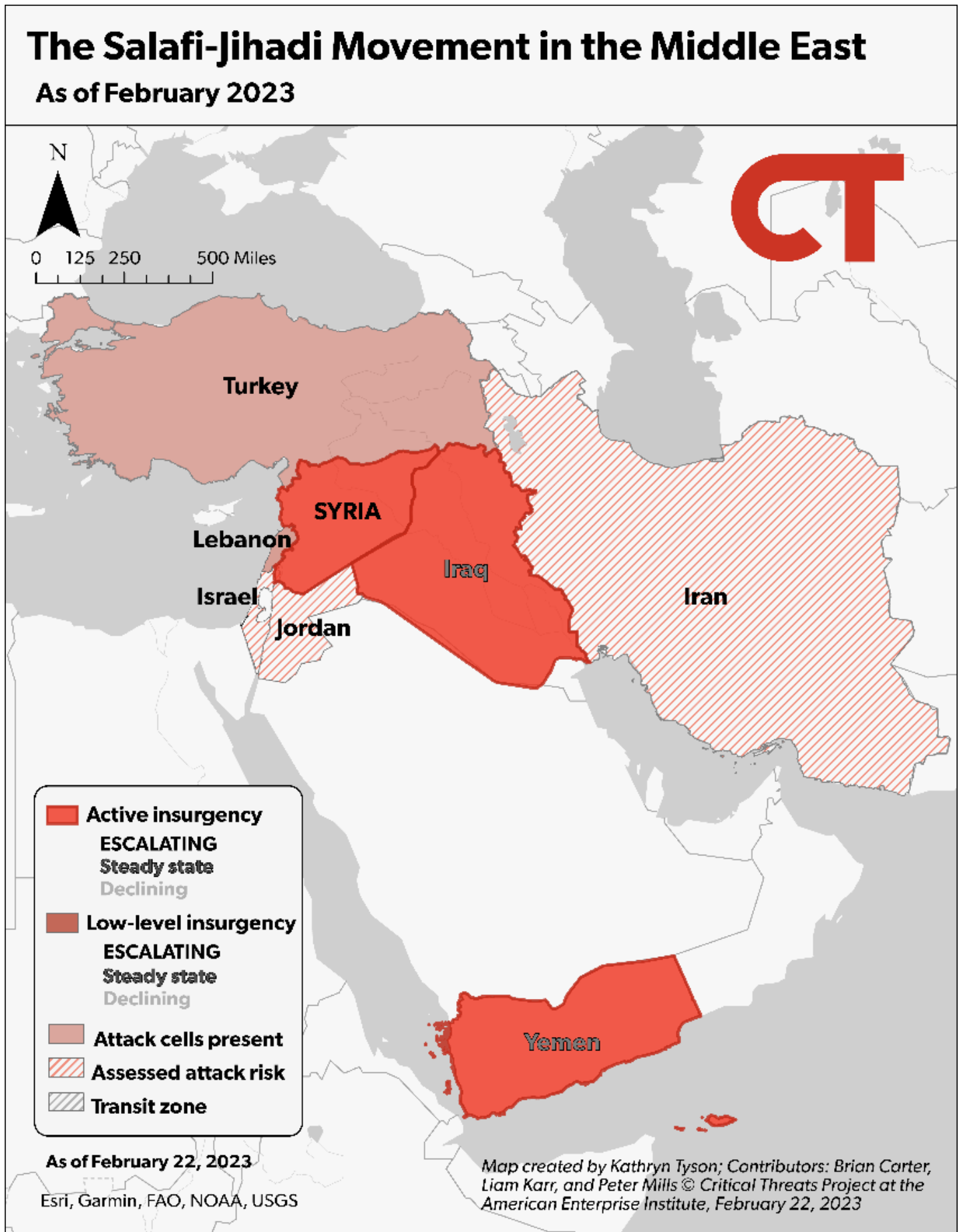
ISIS Activity in the Baghdad Belts

Since August 28, 2022



Source: Brian Carter.

Figure 2. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in the Middle East



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Sahel. JNIM is likely expanding its control over rural areas of southeastern Burkina Faso. JNIM has used Park W—a nature preserve in the border area between Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger—as a sanctuary over the past two years.¹⁴ The group has used the park to launch attacks on security forces and civilians in neighboring areas.¹⁵ JNIM launched another wave of attacks on security forces in the Est region, which contains the western third of the park, in October and November 2022, likely to pin security forces in the area.¹⁶ The group has since begun clearing more villages and besieging more towns in the area, indicating an increased focus on civilian targets.¹⁷ This operational shift and the lack of Burkinabe resistance likely indicates the group successfully pinned security forces and is now changing its focus to consolidating control over rural areas by forcing newly vulnerable locals to submit or flee to isolated population centers.¹⁸

JNIM is likely using its growing support zones in southeastern Burkina Faso to support expanding its activity in neighboring areas of Burkina Faso and the Gulf of Guinea. The group carried out some of its first ever attacks in the Centre-Est and Centre-Sud regions in the last quarter of 2022 with little response from the overstretched Burkinabe security forces.¹⁹ JNIM's growing presence in these regions increases the likelihood of significant spillover into Ghana, which borders both regions. JNIM militants were likely behind an improvised explosive device attack in northern Ghana in February 2023, which would be JNIM's first attack in the country.²⁰

The group has also increased its attacks on Togolese patrols and posts near the Togo–Burkina Faso border since November 2022 to deepen its foothold in northern Togo. JNIM may now be shifting its focus to establishing control in rural areas of northern Togo by coercing civilians, using the same strategy it has in southeastern Burkina Faso. The group has reportedly increased reprisal killings on civilians accused of cooperating with government forces, including a massacre of 31 civilians on February 10.²¹

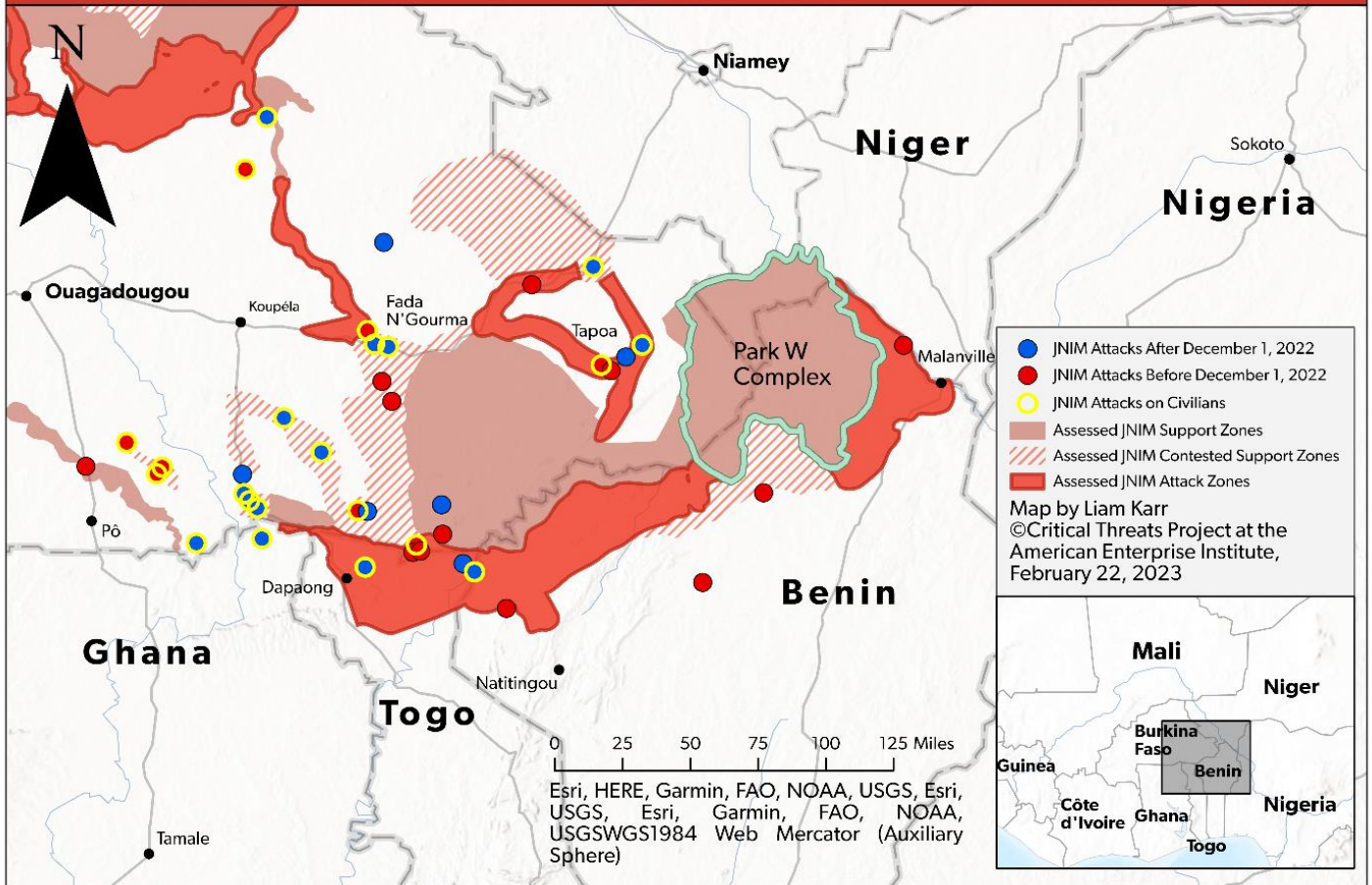
An overemphasis on military solutions and border security without successfully addressing underlying social issues could backfire and boost anti-government sentiment among vulnerable populations in the Gulf of Guinea. JNIM has capitalized on farmer-herder and ethnic tensions in the northern littoral states to recruit from marginalized groups over the past several years.²² JNIM likely seeks to expand into the littoral states to create a buffer zone for its primary area of operations in Burkina Faso and Mali, while the group's local fighters are likely more driven by these popular grievances.²³ Gulf of Guinea governments have reacted to the recent surge of JNIM activity by shoring up military efforts to secure their borders.²⁴ These efforts could exacerbate local grievances by increasing security force abuses and destroying nomadic cross-border economies.²⁵ However, the littoral governments have made efforts to limit this possibility by supplementing their military efforts with social programs that aim to address the popular issues JNIM uses to exploit its insurgency.²⁶

Figure 3. JNIM Activity Along the Southeastern Burkinabe Border

JNIM Activity Along the Southeastern Burkina Faso Border



Since September 1, 2022

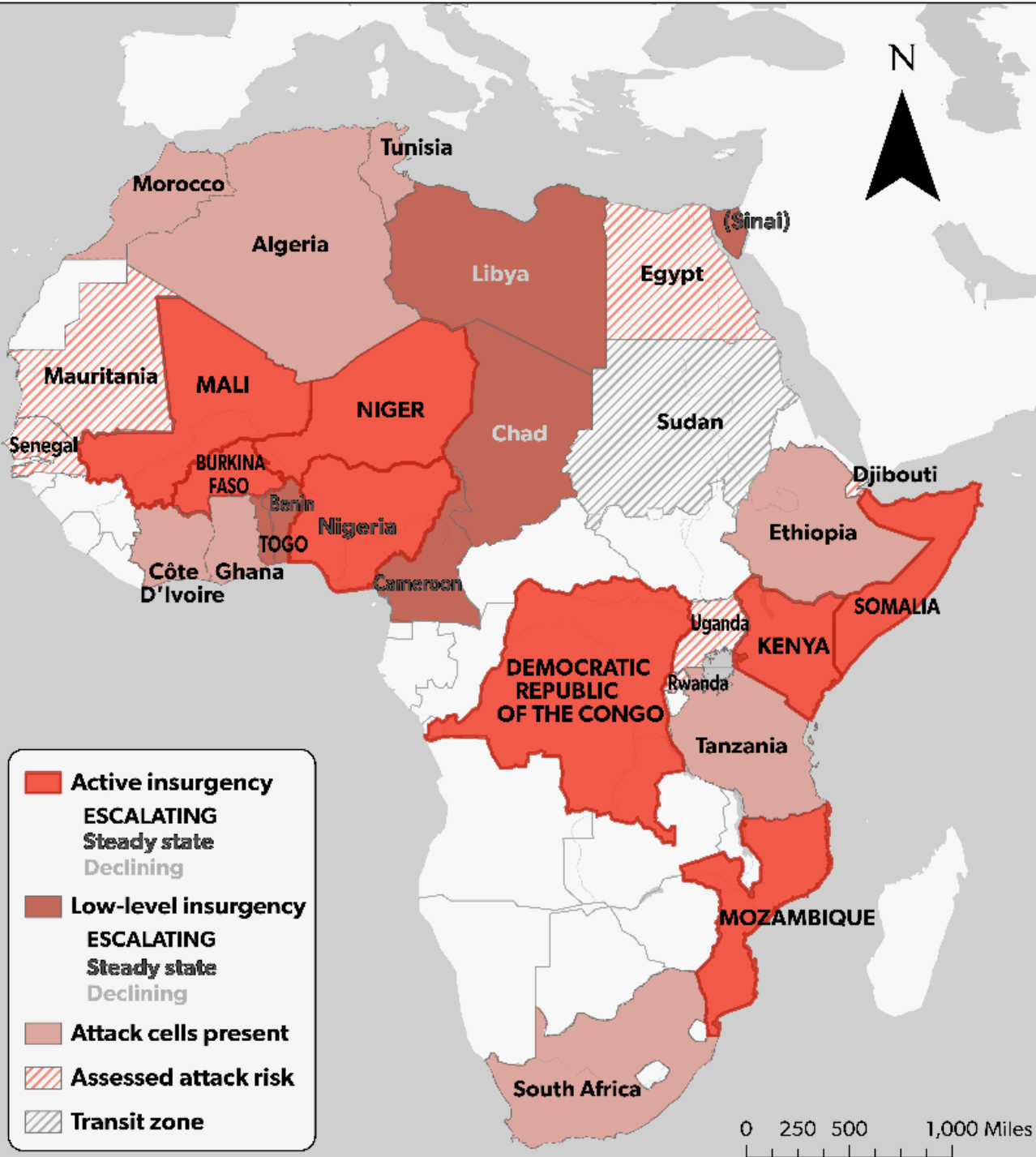


Source: Liam Karr.

Figure 4. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

As of February 2023



As of February 22, 2023

Esri, FAO, NOAA, USGS

Map created by Kathryn Tyson; Contributors: Brian Carter, Liam Karr, and Peter Mills © Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 22, 2023

Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Pakistan. The TTP conducted its most deadly attack in Karachi since 2016, indicating an expansion of TTP attack zones outside northwest Pakistan. Approximately six to 10 TTP militants armed with

grenades and suicide vests raided the Karachi police headquarters on February 17, killing at least five security forces and injuring 18.²⁷ The attack led to an hours-long standoff before Pakistani security forces killed the attackers and cleared the building.²⁸ Pakistani investigators suggested that the militants involved in the attack had inside police help.²⁹ The headquarters is located near major infrastructure, including the Karachi International Airport and a Pakistani air force base.³⁰

In the TTP's last major attack in Karachi, in April 2016, the group launched a small-arms hit-and-run attack that killed seven Pakistani policemen in a Karachi suburb.³¹ The group has been expanding its attacks beyond northwestern Pakistan since ending a cease-fire with the Pakistani government in November 2022.³² The Karachi attack suggests the TTP has expanded its support networks in the vicinity of Karachi, giving the TTP confidence to launch attacks in the area.

Pakistani security forces formed a committee to investigate the attack on February 18 and will likely conduct counter-TTP operations in Karachi to arrest militants they suspect were involved in it.³³ Pakistani security forces formed a similar committee and arrested over a dozen suspects in connection to a major TTP attack in Peshawar in January 2023, though it remains unclear the degree to which the suspects aided the attack.³⁴ Pakistani counterterrorism forces also carried out several raids and arrests targeting suspected TTP militants in Karachi in 2022.³⁵

Pakistan could strike TTP militants in Afghanistan in response to the attack. However, Pakistan is unlikely to publicly claim attacks in Afghanistan as it continues to engage the Afghan Taliban government to restrain the TTP's anti-Pakistan campaign.³⁶

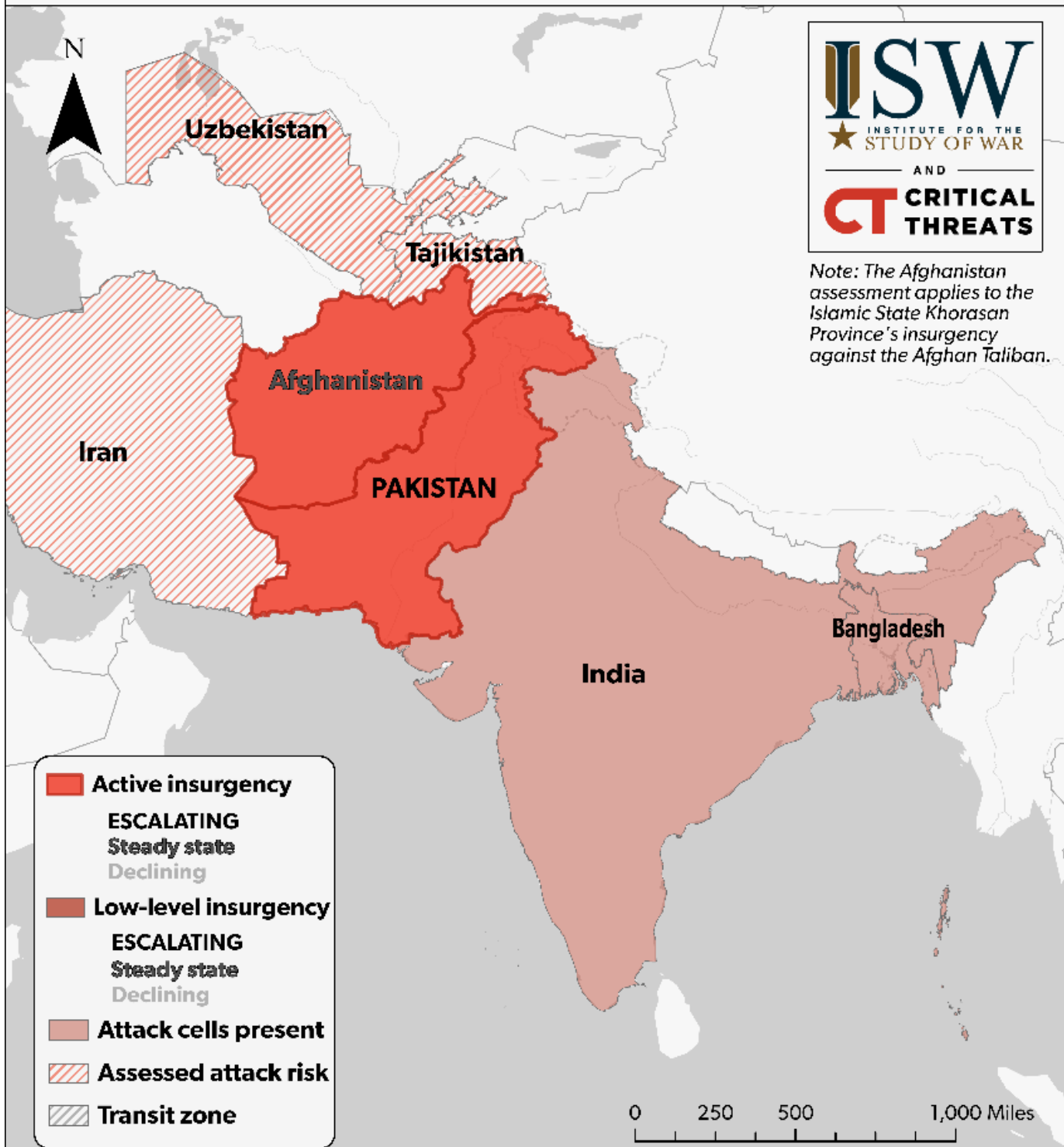
Figure 5. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia

As of February 2023



Note: The Afghanistan assessment applies to the Islamic State Khorasan Province's insurgency against the Afghan Taliban.



As of February 22, 2023
Esri, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS

Map created by Kathryn Tyson; Contributors: Brian Carter, Liam Karr, and Peter Mills © Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, February 22, 2023

Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Middle East

Syria. US and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) raids targeting key ISIS fighters in northeastern Syria will temporarily disrupt but fail to defeat ISIS in the Middle Euphrates River Valley (MERV). US special operations forces conducted a raid targeting the leader of an ISIS network near Hajna, Deir ez Zor province, Syria, on February 17.³⁷ The ISIS leader detonated an explosive device, wounding four US service members.³⁸ The SDF and US forces conducted a second raid on February 18 near Al Sabha, Deir Ez Zor province, killing a “senior ISIS leader” responsible for security.³⁹ The SDF and US forces raid ISIS safe houses and target senior leaders in the MERV consistently, though targeting ISIS leadership in the area does not remove the infrastructure allowing the group to continue operating there.⁴⁰

Africa

Nigeria. The Islamic State’s West Africa Province (ISWAP) will likely try to attack polls in the lead-up to Nigeria’s general elections on February 25. The group released a video on February 20 threatening to attack polls during the elections and reiterating IS ideological arguments that deem democracy incompatible with Islam.⁴¹ The threat is consistent with the group’s previous attacks during elections. The group attacked polling stations in northeastern Nigeria hours before the 2019 general elections, and Salafi-jihadi groups that preceded ISWAP’s formation in 2015 regularly targeted Nigerian elections.⁴² ISWAP has expanded its area of operations into central Nigeria since the 2019 elections and attempted to assassinate the Nigerian president in south-central Nigeria’s Kogi State in December 2022, highlighting that it is capable of attacking more politically sensitive targets during the upcoming election.⁴³ ISWAP detonated an improvised explosive device outside a local government office near a local election office in Kogi State on February 21, which could be a precursor to other planned ISWAP attacks in the area.⁴⁴

Burkina Faso. Two deadly Islamic State attacks in Burkina Faso will likely threaten the legitimacy of the Burkinabe junta. The Islamic State’s Greater Sahara Province (ISGS) killed at least 70 Burkinabe soldiers in two ambushes in northeastern Burkina Faso on February 17 and 20.⁴⁵ The soldiers reportedly failed to heed intelligence warnings about poor weather and sandstorms before the February 17 attack, which likely contributed to the severity of the ambush.⁴⁶ The two attacks are among the deadliest-ever ISGS attacks in Burkina Faso. The fatalities will likely cause unrest among the military and civilians in politically sensitive areas of Burkina Faso and undermine the Burkinabe junta. The Burkinabe junta released a statement on February 22 condemning publications that “undermine” the army and attribute “denigrating” remarks to military leaders. The statement suggests the junta perceives that the fatalities could cause anti-regime unrest among the military and in politically sensitive areas of Burkina Faso.⁴⁷ Growing dissatisfaction in the military could ultimately contribute to another coup, as mass casualty jihadist attacks preceded both Burkinabe coups in 2022.⁴⁸

Somalia. Al Shabaab launched a suicide raid in Mogadishu in retaliation for the Somali Federal Government’s (SFG) offensive in central Somalia. A suicide bomber and four gunmen attacked a building housing wounded local militia from central Somalia on February 21.⁴⁹ Somali security forces killed the gunmen after a seven hour standoff.⁵⁰ Somali officials claimed the siege killed 10 civilians, while al Shabaab claimed it killed at least 70 militiamen.⁵¹ The siege is part of a wider al Shabaab revenge campaign targeting government and military buildings in Mogadishu for the SFG’s counterterrorism efforts in central Somalia.⁵² The February 21 attack is the fifth suicide siege-style attack in southern Somalia since September 2022—four of which occurred in Mogadishu.⁵³

South Asia

Afghanistan. Iran stepped up its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban government as part of its efforts to develop a strategic relationship with the Taliban.⁵⁴ Iran handed over Afghanistan's embassy in Iran to the Taliban government and accepted a new Taliban-appointed ambassador. Former Afghan diplomats reported Iran is preventing 15 anti-Taliban diplomats from entering the embassy.⁵⁵ The new Taliban ambassador to Iran is reportedly a Pashtun Taliban commander from Ghazni who previously organized Taliban suicide bombings.⁵⁶ Iran downplayed the handover and insisted the move will not change how Iran interacts with the Taliban government.⁵⁷ The Iranian special representative to Afghanistan has repeatedly called for expanded security cooperation with the Taliban government since at least mid-2022 to address the Islamic State Khorasan Province threat in Afghanistan.⁵⁸

Pakistan. The Islamic State's Pakistani Province (ISPP) assassinated an alleged Sufi in Mastung in southwestern Pakistan on February 15.⁵⁹ ISPP also attacked a Pakistani security checkpoint in Mastung and killed two security personnel on February 17.⁶⁰ The group regularly targets religious minorities and Pakistani security forces in attacks in southwestern Pakistan. ISPP last conducted attacks in Pakistan in October 2022. The attacks are in line with previous ISPP attack patterns and do not represent an increase in scale or frequency. ISPP attacks are sporadic, and there have been multiple months-long lulls between them since the group's formation in 2019.⁶¹

¹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/region/baghdad-belts>

² <https://www.mawazin dot net/Details.aspx?Jimare=174322>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/two-killed-13-wounded-explosion-iraqs-sadr-city-sources-2021-07-19>

⁴ <https://apnews.com/article/explosions-iraq-baghdad-6a35e060adeb1d5312e55d2f925df23>; source available upon request.

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/explosions-iraq-baghdad-6a35e060adeb1d5312e55d2f925df23>; source available upon request;

<https://www.alrasheedmedia dot com/2023/02/03/472213/>; <https://www.mawazin dot net/Details.aspx?Jimare=218317>

⁶ Source available upon request

⁷ https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/_pda/2023/01/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%CC%84-Newsletter-372.pdf

⁸ <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Shia-Militia-Briefing-Newlines-Institute-1.pdf>; <https://www.alaraby dot>

[co.uk/politics/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%22-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AD%D8%A9](https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/politics/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%84%D9%80%22%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%22-%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%B8%D9%85%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%A6%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AD%D8%A9); <https://www.alaraby dot>

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[co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%22%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%22-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9](https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AD%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AF%D9%86-%22%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B2%D9%88%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%22-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%83%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%82%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%A9)

⁹ <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/the-islamic-state-at-low-ebb-in-iraq-the-insurgent-tide-recedes-again>

¹⁰ <https://enablingpeace.org/ishm277>; https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/Policy_brief_Islamic_State_in_Iraq_in_early_2022.pdf

¹¹ <https://enablingpeace.org/ishm289>

¹² <https://www.mei.edu/publications/taking-stock-first-100-days-iraqs-new-government>; <https://www.alaraby dot>

[co.uk/node/5589563](https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/node/5589563)

¹³ <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/back-basics-us-iraq-security-cooperation-post-combat-era>

¹⁴ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w>

¹⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w>

¹⁶ <https://maliactu dot net/burkina-faso-une-dizaine-de-soldats-tues-dans-une-embuscade-dans-lest>;

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¹⁷ https://twitter.com/Danoumis_Traore/status/1624913538824261633?s=20&t=PULnz_T3bxuKP7n3AJe1Q;

https://twitter.com/Danoumis_Traore/status/1617530899914002432?s=20&t=42_E8nVWmBd8Z6ui5CRKiQ;

https://twitter.com/Danoumis_Traore/status/1628058953656545281?s=20

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- ¹⁸ https://twitter.com/Danoumis_Traore/status/1624913538824261633?s=20&t=PULnz_T3bxuKP7n3AJe1Q;
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- ²¹ https://twitter.com/EgountchiLdna/status/1623989495363252227?s=20&t=ne_lwfyozt7BFdCqwxu2lg;
<https://twitter.com/StratStability/status/1622338187371876352?s=20&t=BxqKo4s1UMiBOBZEePMCAw>
- ²² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/africa-file/africa-file-salafi-jihadi-groups-may-exploit-local-grievances-to-expand-in-west-africas-gulf-of-guinea;> <https://elva.org/news/atakora-analytical-report;> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/burkina-faso-niger-benin/310-containing-militancy-west-africas-park-w>
- ²³ <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2022/conflict-in-the-penta-border-area>
- ²⁴ https://twitter.com/Dsiribie/status/1623976644871430146?s=20&t=ne_lwfyozt7BFdCqwxu2lg;
https://twitter.com/RKoeta/status/1625551492340932608?s=20&t=avnsRZTsu3Sm1kcbYr_UoQ;
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<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/togo-presidency-oversee-armed-forces-security-worsens-2022-12-23>
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- ²⁷ <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1626599571081293824?s=20;> <https://www.dawn.com/news/1738000/death-toll-of-karachi-police-chief-office-attack-rises-to-5-fir-registered>
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