



Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, March 1, 2023

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Data Cutoff: March 1, 2023, at 10 a.m.

Key Takeaways:

Iraq. Iran-backed Shi'a militants likely massacred unarmed Sunni civilians in Diyala on February 20. ISIS has not commented on the attack. Pro-Iran politicians accused ISIS of the attack, likely in an effort to obfuscate responsibility. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) arrested 18 suspects in the attack, though it is highly unlikely the Iraqi government will hold the perpetrators accountable. ISIS may use this attack to position itself as a protector of the local community. ISIS may do this by targeting local security forces, particularly Shi'a militias, to illustrate its capabilities to locals.

Afghanistan. Iranian security assistance may be supporting recent Taliban counterterrorism successes against Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP). Taliban forces killed ISKP's chief of military operations and the former leader of Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP) in Kabul on February 26 and February 14, respectively. ISKP operations may be hindered in the short run, but these killings are unlikely to have a decisive impact on ISKP over the long run.

Assessments:

Iraq. Iran-backed Iraqi Shi'a militias likely massacred local Sunni civilians in Al Jayalah, Khalis district, Diyala province, on February 20.¹ Iraqi army forces withdrew from the vicinity of Al Jayalah the week before the attack, enabling Shi'a militias to enter the area.² Shi'a militias also intimidated locals by firing weapons at residents and driving Popular Mobilization Forces vehicles into the town before the attack.³ Iran-backed Badr Organization officials moved immediately to obfuscate the attack's origin.⁴ Local tribes blamed Iran-backed militias for the massacre in major protests on February 23.⁵ These militias have historically engaged in similar types of sectarian killings in both Diyala and throughout Iraq.⁶

Badr Organization officials blamed ISIS, and the Iraqi government cited "clan conflict" for the massacre. ISIS likely was not responsible. ISIS claims nearly all of its attacks in Iraq to highlight its ability to punish the population for working with the government and its continued relevance.⁷ The group's claims include a similar massacre in December 2022, which occurred in Albu Bali, a village

that borders Al Jayalah.⁸ It is also highly unlikely that tribal conflict is the cause of this massacre.⁹ Tribal disputes more often manifest as major shoot-outs wherein both sides are armed and prepared for confrontation rather than massacres of unarmed men, women, and children.¹⁰

The Iraqi government's response in Diyala will likely fail to secure both Shi'a and Sunni communities against further acts of violence.¹¹ Locals are expressing distrust in the ISF's ability to bring the perpetrators to justice.¹² The ISF will likely briefly arrest militia members before promptly releasing them.¹³ The Iraqi government has promised to investigate similar massacres, before failing to make arrests or release findings to the public.¹⁴

ISIS may seek to take advantage of the ISF response by gradually increasing its role in the protection of Sunni communities. ISIS responded on February 23 to Shi'a militia calls for sectarian cleansing north of Baghdad by encouraging locals to fight against the local militias there.¹⁵ ISIS may make similar calls in other areas, which would likely trigger ISIS attacks targeting local Shi'a militants. It could also target Shi'a communities to trigger tit-for-tat sectarian violence, which would allow ISIS to further present itself as a security guarantor against local communities who seek to remove Sunni populations.

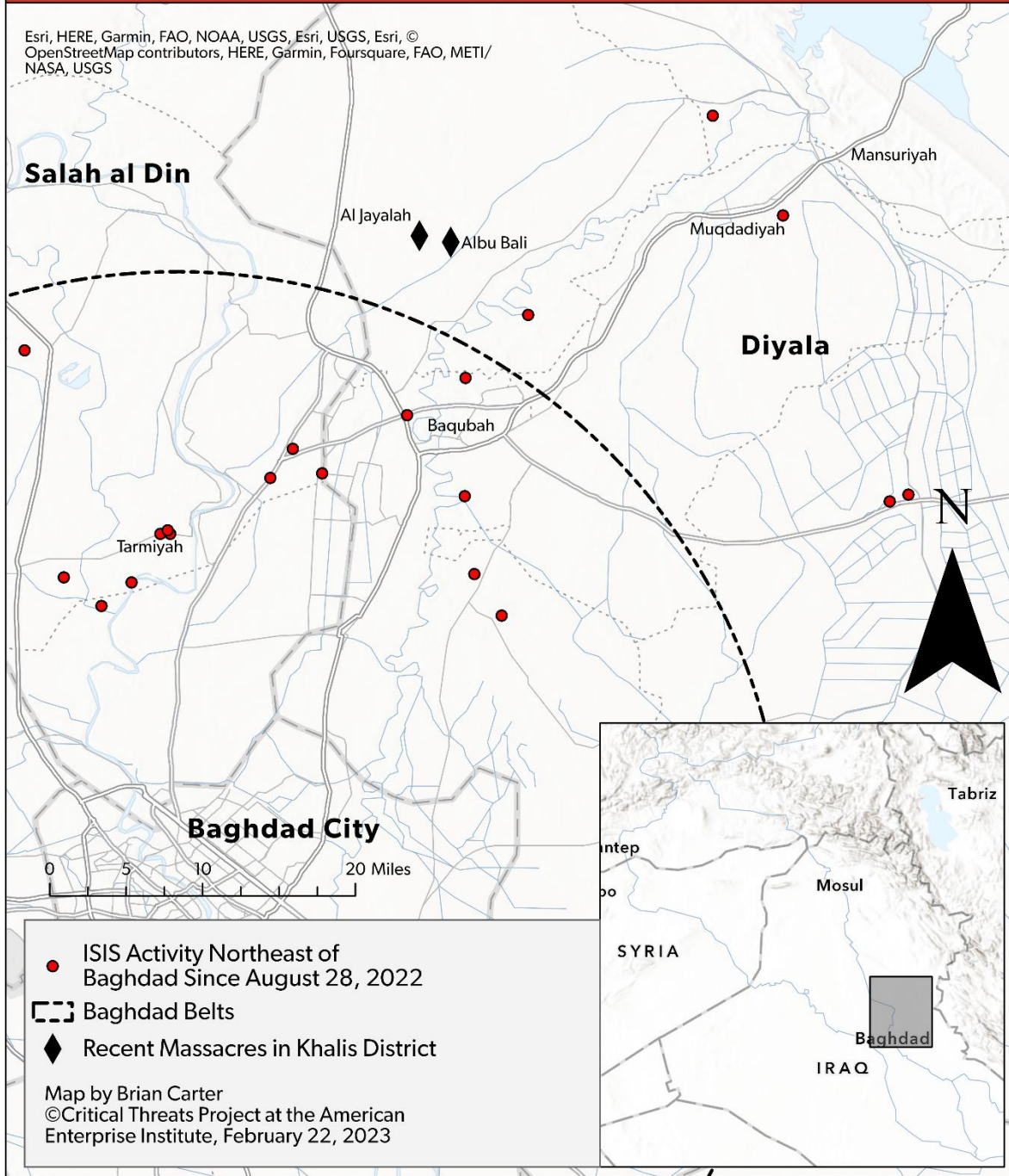
Figure 1. Massacres Targeting Civilians and ISIS Activity Northeast of Baghdad

Massacres Targeting Civilians and ISIS Activity Northeast of Baghdad

Since August 28, 2022



Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, Esri, USGS, Esri, ©
OpenStreetMap contributors, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, FAO, METI/
NASA, USGS



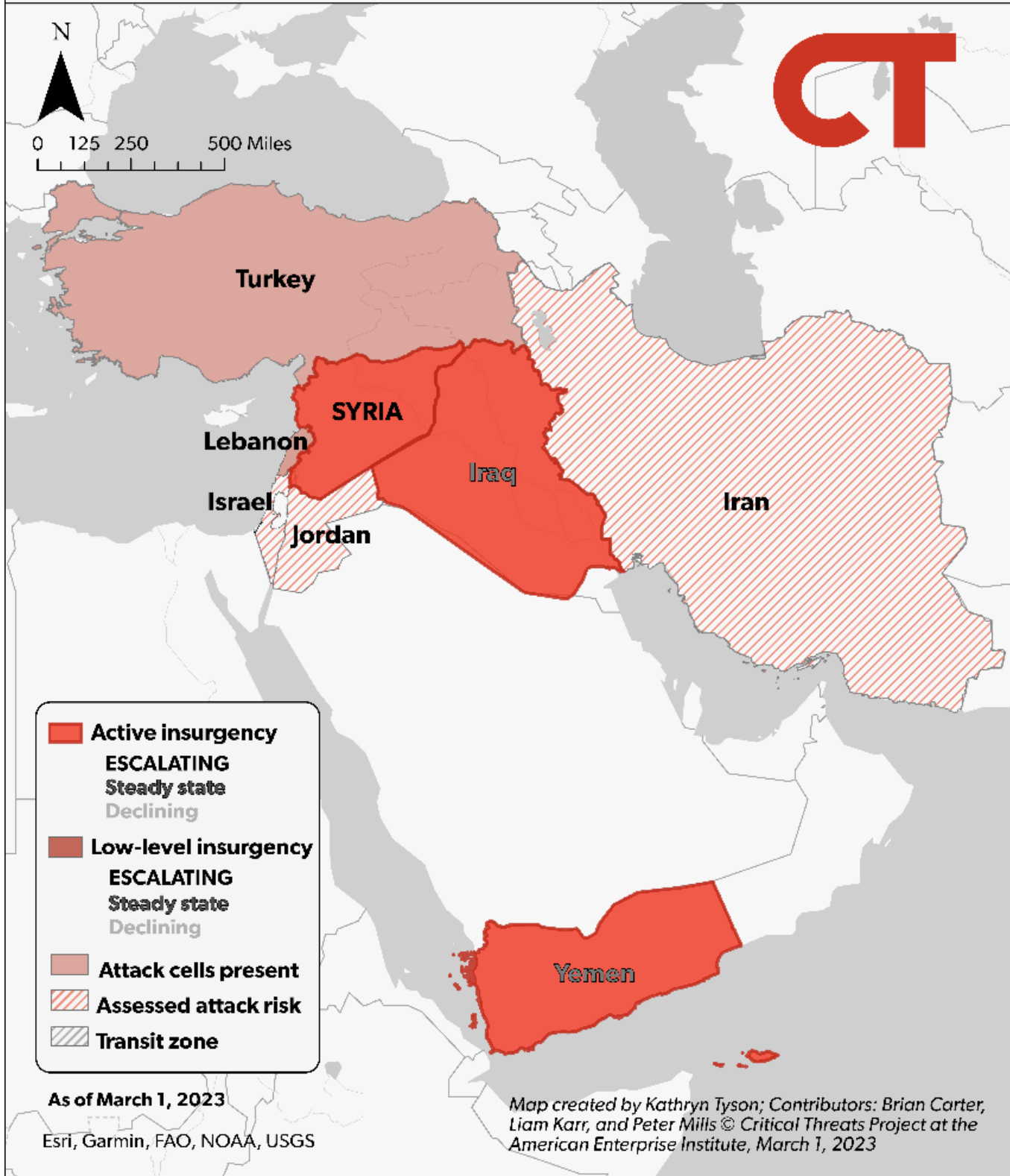
Source:

Brian Carter.

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

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in the Middle East

As of March 2023



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

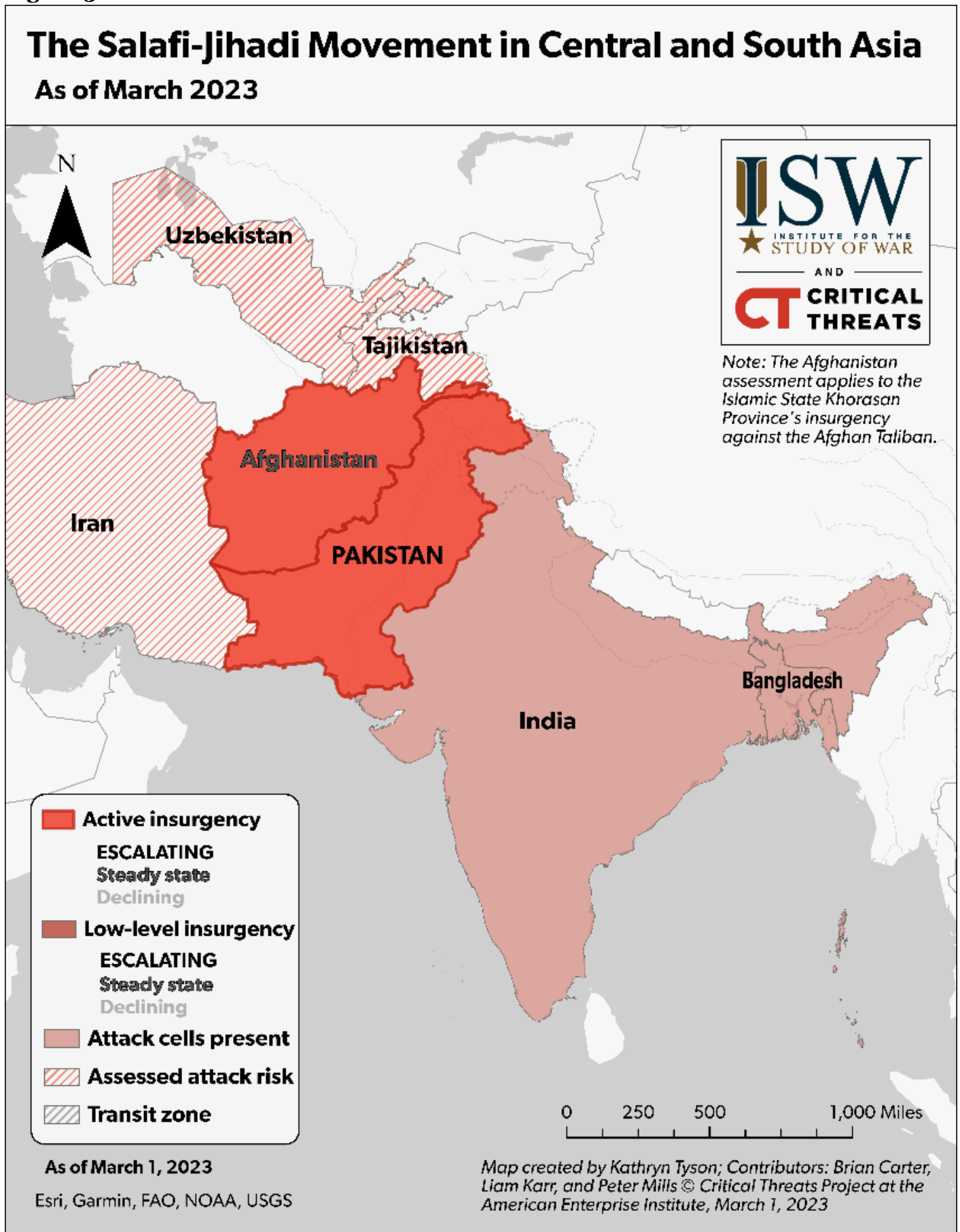
Afghanistan. Taliban security forces killed two ISKP leaders in February, possibly with Iranian assistance. Taliban security forces conducted raids that killed the ISKP leader for India operations, Ejaz Ahangar, on February 14 and Military Operations Chief Qari Fateh on February 26.¹⁶ Unverified reports state the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) met with unidentified Taliban leaders in Kandahar and agreed to assist the Taliban government with operations against ISKP.¹⁷ Iran's special representative to Afghanistan—an IRGC-QF member—regularly meets with Taliban leaders and has repeatedly called for Iran to cooperate with the Taliban on anti-ISKP operations.¹⁸

The IRGC-QF may have requested the Taliban release water from Afghanistan to address a serious, ongoing drought in Iran. Iran has repeatedly asked the Taliban for this assistance since at least February 2022.¹⁹ However, Afghanistan is suffering from its own drought and needs the water for domestic use, making it unlikely the Taliban can comply without provoking domestic unrest.

The death of Fateh may inhibit ISKP operations in major cities during a possible future ISKP spring offensive.²⁰ Fateh was reportedly responsible for organizing ISKP attacks targeting diplomatic facilities and Taliban leaders in Kabul.²¹ ISKP has support bases in eastern Afghanistan from which to draw a new operations chief.²² The Institute for the Study of War and the Critical Threats Project cannot assess at this time who ISKP will select as the new operations chief or when. ISKP typically conducts spring offensives against the Taliban. It is unclear if Fateh completed spring attack plans for 2023, enabling ISKP to resume attacks during the coming months. Fateh's death does not address the fact that ISKP retains supporters in the Taliban government and intelligence services, which has enabled the group to carry out attacks on Taliban leaders.²³

The death could degrade ISKP outreach to Indian nationals in the near term. Ahangar recruited Indians to carry out attacks in Afghanistan and may have been responsible for attacks carried out by Indian nationals in Kabul and Jalalabad in 2020.²⁴ Ahangar formerly served as the first leader of ISHP, the Islamic State affiliate in India and Jammu and Kashmir, which likely helped Ahangar recruit Indian nationals for ISKP.²⁵

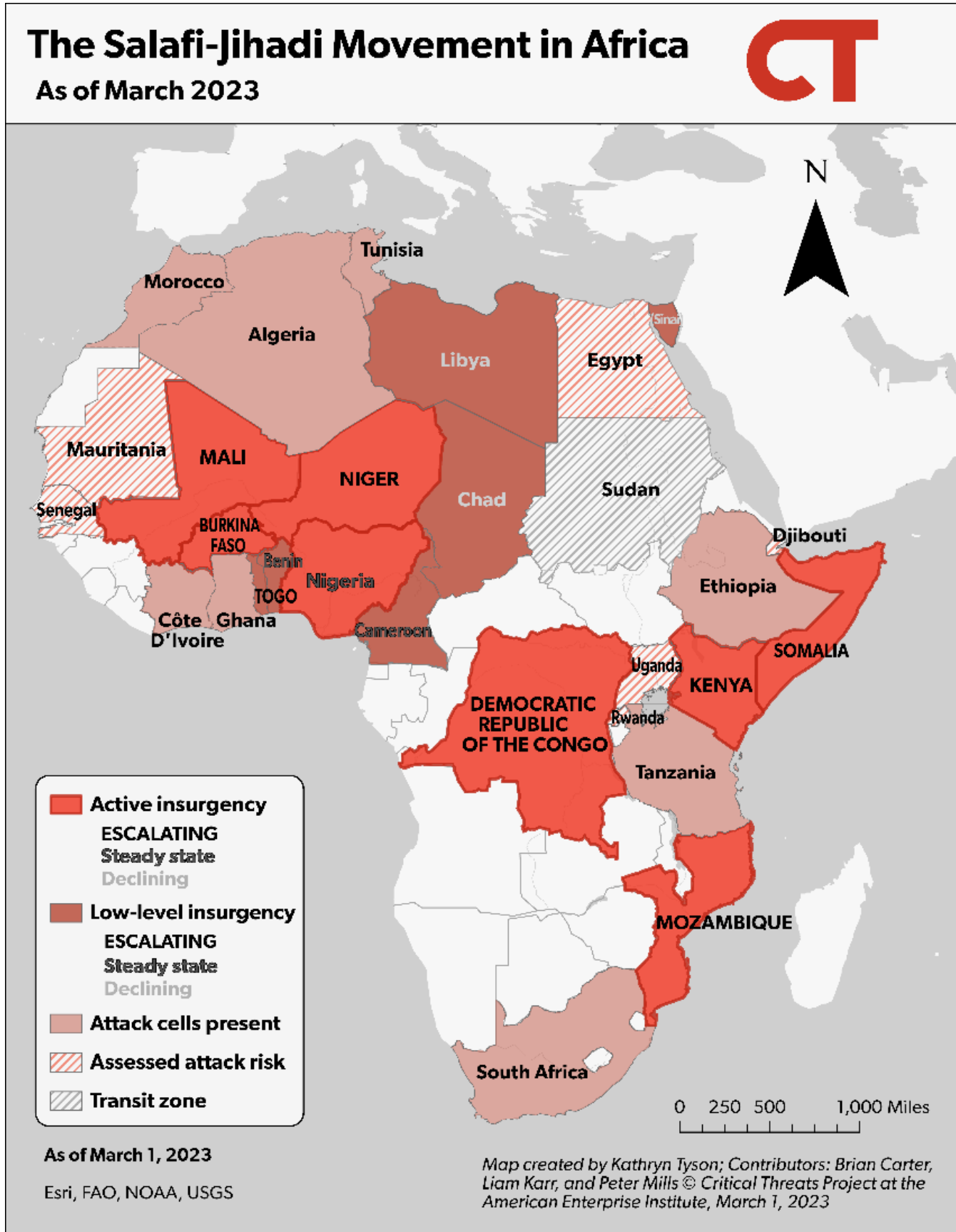
Figure 3. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

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

Figure 4. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Africa

Burkina Faso. Al Qaeda and Islamic State–affiliated militants are taking advantage of the Burkinabe army’s manpower limitations to conduct increasingly deadly attacks in the peripheral regions of eastern Burkina Faso. Al Qaeda’s Sahelian branch Jama’at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen ransacked Partiaga village, in southeastern Burkina Faso, on February 26, reportedly killing at least 70 people and burning down numerous buildings.²⁶ Federal officials have still not acknowledged the attack.²⁷ The Islamic State’s Greater Sahara Province also killed over 70 Burkinabe soldiers in two separate attacks on February 17 and 19 in northeastern Burkina Faso.²⁸

¹ <https://www.ina dot iq/178726--.html>

² https://twitter.com/Afada_iraq/status/1627964582227505152?s=20

³ https://twitter.com/Afada_iraq/status/1627964582227505152?s=20

⁴ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/61016>; <https://ninanews dot com/Website/News/Details?key=1035803>

⁵ <https://www.alsharqiya dot com/ar/news/notables-and-tribal-sheikhs-give-the-authorities-72-hours-to-uncover-the-perpetrators-of-the-al-jayila-massacre>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/07/31/iraq-ban-abusive-militias-mosul-operation>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/31/iraq-possible-war-crimes-shia-militia>; <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/02/15/iraq-militias-escalate-abuses-possibly-war-crimes>

⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03071847.2020.1734318>

⁸ Source available upon request

⁹ <https://www.ina dot iq/178726--.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/tribal-conflicts-escalate-in-iraqs-oil-heartland-42913>; <https://alsharqiya dot com/en/news/a-conflict-in-al-hartha-a-shootout-between-two-clans-in-the-karma-region>; <https://www.rudaw dot net/english/middleeast/iraq/261120202>; <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/01/iraq-tribes-armed-conflict.html>

¹¹ <https://yaqinnews dot net/politics/386928>

¹² <https://yaqinnews dot net/politics/386928>

¹³ <https://ninanews dot com/Website/News/Details?key=1036568>; <https://www.thenationalnews dot om/world/unpopular-mobilisation-the-farhathiya-massacre-and-the-rise-of-iraq-s-militias-1.1101948>; <https://enablingpeace.org/ishm277>

¹⁴ <https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A9-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86>

¹⁵ Note that this source contains graphic imagery: <https://jihadology.net/wp-content/uploads/pda/2023/02/The-Islamic-State-al-Naba%CC%84-Newsletter-379.pdf>; <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jurf-al-sakhar-model-militias-debate-how-carve-out-new-enclave-north-baghdad>

¹⁶ <https://twitter.com/GDI1415/status/1630266228458528777>;

https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1630265938644811785;

https://twitter.com/taahir_khan/status/1630380917913952257; <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1630267445930852353>

¹⁷ <https://twitter.com/bsarwary/status/1630297034182873088>

¹⁸ http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7032557.stm; <https://www.mei.edu/publications/tehrans-controversial-ambassador-pick-sign-irgcs-expanding-influence-iraq>; <https://www.tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1399/01/30/2244975/ت>;

<https://twitter.com/SpecialIran/status/1558048667763974144>; <https://aamajnews24 dot com/iran-90/>;

<https://tehrantimes dot com/news/480428/> dot com/fa/news/1399/01/30/2244975/

¹⁹ <https://www.presstv dot ir/Detail/2022/02/13/676772/Iran-water-Afghanistan-Helmand-dam>

²⁰ <https://twitter.com/GDI1415/status/1630266228458528777>;

https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1630265938644811785;

https://twitter.com/taahir_khan/status/1630380917913952257; https://twitter.com/taahir_khan/status/1630380917913952257

²¹ <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1630273668847751168>;

<https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1630476276413677568>

²² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/mapping-anti-taliban-insurgencies-in-afghanistan>

²³ <https://twitter.com/bsarwary/status/1630657787150712837>; <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1600800236707794944>; <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1601485697298620416>

²⁴ <https://theprint dot in/india/top-kashmir-jihad-commander-who-led-indian-suicide-bombers-in-afghan-is-attacks-believed-killed/1385976/>; <https://www dot indiatoday dot in/amp/world/story/top-islamic-state-commander-killed-by-taliban-forces-in-afghanistan-2340498-2023-02-28>; <https://www.militantwire.com/p/islamic-state-in-afghanistan-bolsters>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/Natsecjeff/status/1628104311983964163>

²⁶ <https://twitter.com/MENASTREAM/status/1630332501305483264?s=20>; <https://www.voaafrique.com/a/burkina-des-habitants-%C3%A9voquent-un-film-d-horreur-apr%C3%A8s-une-attaque-jihadiste-dans-l-est/6981159.html>

²⁷ <https://twitter.com/Dsiribie/status/1630494070249234432?s=20>

²⁸ <https://www.barrons.com/news/nearly-70-troops-killed-in-two-jihadist-attacks-in-troubled-burkina-970605f0>