



Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, March 8, 2023

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Data Cutoff: March 8, 2023, at 10 a.m.

Key Takeaways:

Syria. ISIS has increased its attacks in Syria's central desert since early February, likely to secure resources and ISIS supply lines between northeast and central Syria. The group focused on targeting civilians for economic gain in central Syria, while targeting regime and Iran-backed forces closer to the Euphrates River to maintain supply lines. The corresponding decrease in ISIS attacks in northeastern Syria is not due to counterterrorism pressure or the group giving lower priority to northeastern Syria, but instead may have been preparation for a major attack targeting detention facilities.

Somalia. The Somali Federal Government (SFG) will begin a major offensive targeting al Shabaab-controlled areas of southern Somalia in the coming months. The SFG will likely be able to contest significant portions of southern Somalia's Lower Jubba region during the offensive because it has competent and well-equipped clearing forces. It is highly unlikely that the SFG will penetrate the al Shabaab heartland in the neighboring Middle Jubba region, because of strong al Shabaab resistance. However, the offensive could still weaken al Shabaab and set conditions for future offensives by targeting al Shabaab logistical nodes in Lower Jubba. The SFG will likely struggle to hold newly contested areas in the long term because of a lack of adequate holding forces.

Afghanistan. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) may be shifting its attack pattern to increasingly target civilians associated with the Taliban government. The Taliban may respond to increased ISKP attacks targeting civilians by carrying out more aggressive counter-ISKP operations in suspected ISKP support areas. These Taliban counter-ISKP operations will likely cause significant civilian casualties. In the most dangerous scenario, this could foment further instability in Afghanistan and increase support for ISKP.

India. ISKP may be unable to replace its leader for India operations, Ejaz Ahangar, for several months. The Afghan Taliban killed the leader in Kabul, Afghanistan, on February 14. ISKP claimed two attacks in India in 2022 on March 4, possibly to highlight its capabilities and offset the effects of

Ahangar's death on the group's recruitment from India. ISKP is likely overstating its role in these attacks to benefit its India recruitment.

Assessments:

Syria. ISIS attack cells increased the frequency of attacks in the regime-held central Syrian desert and Deir ez Zor in February and March 2023, after a decrease in January.¹ The group has more than doubled the number of attacks in the central Syrian desert since January while expanding their geographic scope.² ISIS is targeting shepherds and truffle harvesters in the western central Syrian desert while focusing on military targets closer to the Euphrates River.³

Recent ISIS attacks likely aim to secure resources for ISIS fighters while simultaneously maintaining the group's ground line of communication between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlled northeast Syria and the regime-controlled central Syrian desert. ISIS cells in eastern Hama and southern Raqqa are preying on local shepherds and truffle harvesters to secure resources to sustain their fighters.⁴ The group relies on robbery and crime to secure food and other supplies for its fighters in the resource-sparse central Syrian desert.⁵ ISIS kills shepherds and steals "hundreds" of sheep at a time to feed its fighters and targets truffle harvesters to fund operations.⁶ Truffles sell in Hama city for \$11 per pound.⁷

ISIS is prioritizing military targets near the Euphrates River to maintain its ground line of communication between ISIS cells in SDF-controlled northeast Syria and the central Syrian desert.⁸ ISIS uses the porous line of control between the SDF and the regime to move people and supplies between the central Syrian desert and northeast Syria.⁹ Iran-backed units likely increased their presence along the M4 road to secure their own ground line of communication between Albu Kamal and Aleppo, threatening ISIS ground lines of communication between northeast and central Syria.¹⁰ Iran is likely moving military personnel and equipment via the M4 highway to Aleppo.¹¹ ISIS is likely responding to Iran's greater emphasis on the M4 by targeting Iran- and regime-backed counterterrorism forces with improvised-explosive-device and small-arms attacks against checkpoints.¹²

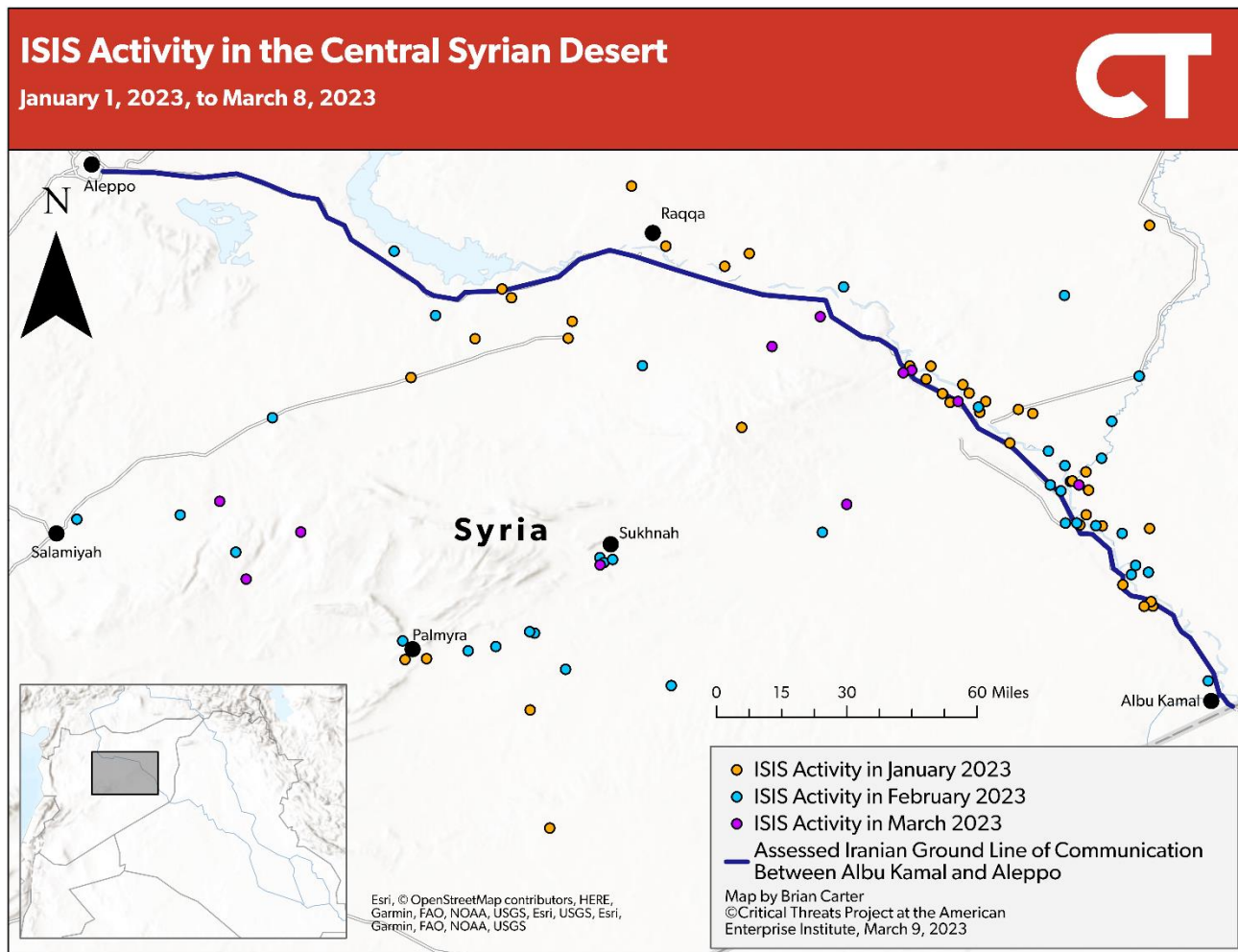
Northeast Syria. The SDF likely disrupted an ISIS attack plot targeting al Hol internally displaced people camp, al Sina'a prison, and Alaya prison in northeast Syria. Local Syrian media reported on March 5 that SDF "commandos" reinforced positions near al Sina'a and Alaya prisons after reports of "problems inside al Sina'a prison" and ISIS preparations for a "rebellion" in al Hol internally displaced people camp.¹³ The SDF established a "military area" and evicted "homeless" people living in mosques in the neighborhood surrounding al Sina'a prison on March 6 and 7.¹⁴

ISIS may have exposed two mid-level leaders as they coordinated and planned for the attack, enabling two successful US raids in mid-February.¹⁵ An attack targeting a major detention facility would require multiple cells across northeast Syria to coordinate planning and prepare forces for the operation. Cells in northeast Syria are "intentionally siloed," requiring the involvement of a "sector commander" when two or more cells are involved.¹⁶ The requirements on the ISIS commander to coordinate between his forces may have allowed US forces to target him.

ISIS likely did not decrease attacks in SDF-controlled Deir ez Zor in February due to increased counterterrorism pressure. The SDF did not carry out any major counterterrorism operations in late January or early February.¹⁷ The two US raids and other small-scale SDF operations did not exert sufficient counterterrorism pressure to force the group to move cells from northeastern Syria. The number of ISIS fighters detained and killed by the coalition and SDF in February 2023 is lower than the monthly average of ISIS fighters detained and killed in 2022.¹⁸ ISIS likely decreased attacks to prepare resources and attack cells to launch attacks against prison facilities to free fighters. ISIS

previously decreased attacks over multiple months to prepare for their attack against al Sina'a prison in January 2022.¹⁹

Figure 1. ISIS Activity in the Central Syrian Desert

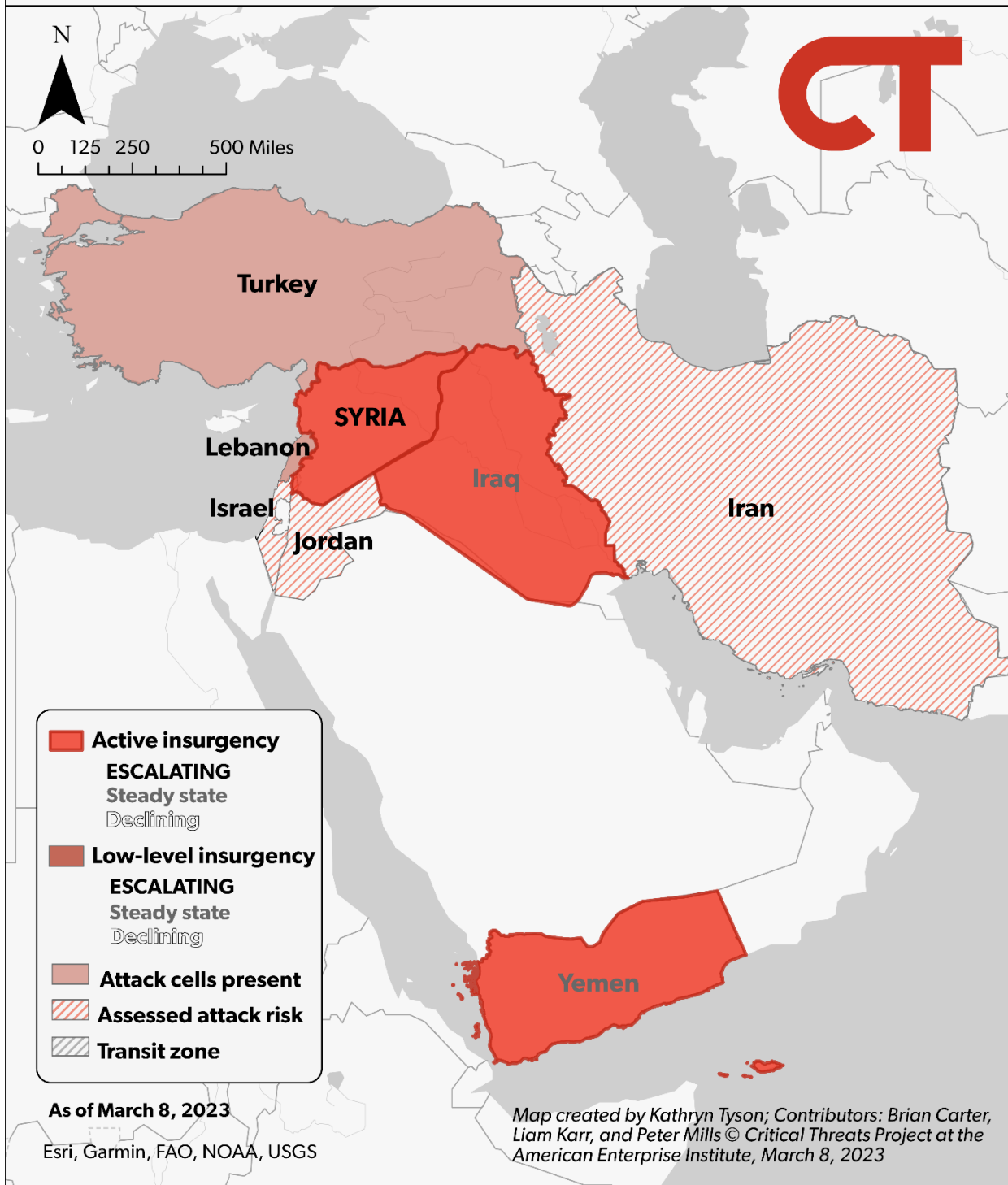


Source: Brian Carter.

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.

Somalia. The SFG will begin a major offensive targeting al Shabaab–controlled areas of southern Somalia in the coming months. The SFG has been preparing for an offensive against al Shabaab in southern Somalia’s Lower Jubba since January.²⁰ Somalia has also received increased international support in recent weeks, further indicating an upcoming offensive. The Somali national security adviser announced on March 2 that Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Kenya would be sending non–African

Union forces to Somalia to participate in offensive “search and destroy” operations under the joint command of Somali security forces within eight weeks.²¹ Each country reportedly agreed to send an additional 1,000 troops to operate in the same regions as their compatriots in the African Union mission.²² The first Ethiopian contingents entered Somalia on March 6.²³ This will be the first time non-African Union forces are participating in joint offensive operations with Somali forces since at least 2016.²⁴ The United States also delivered 61 tons of ammunition and weapons to US-trained Danab special forces—which have been the primary clearing force across Somalia—on February 28, indicating that Danab is stocking up for operations.²⁵

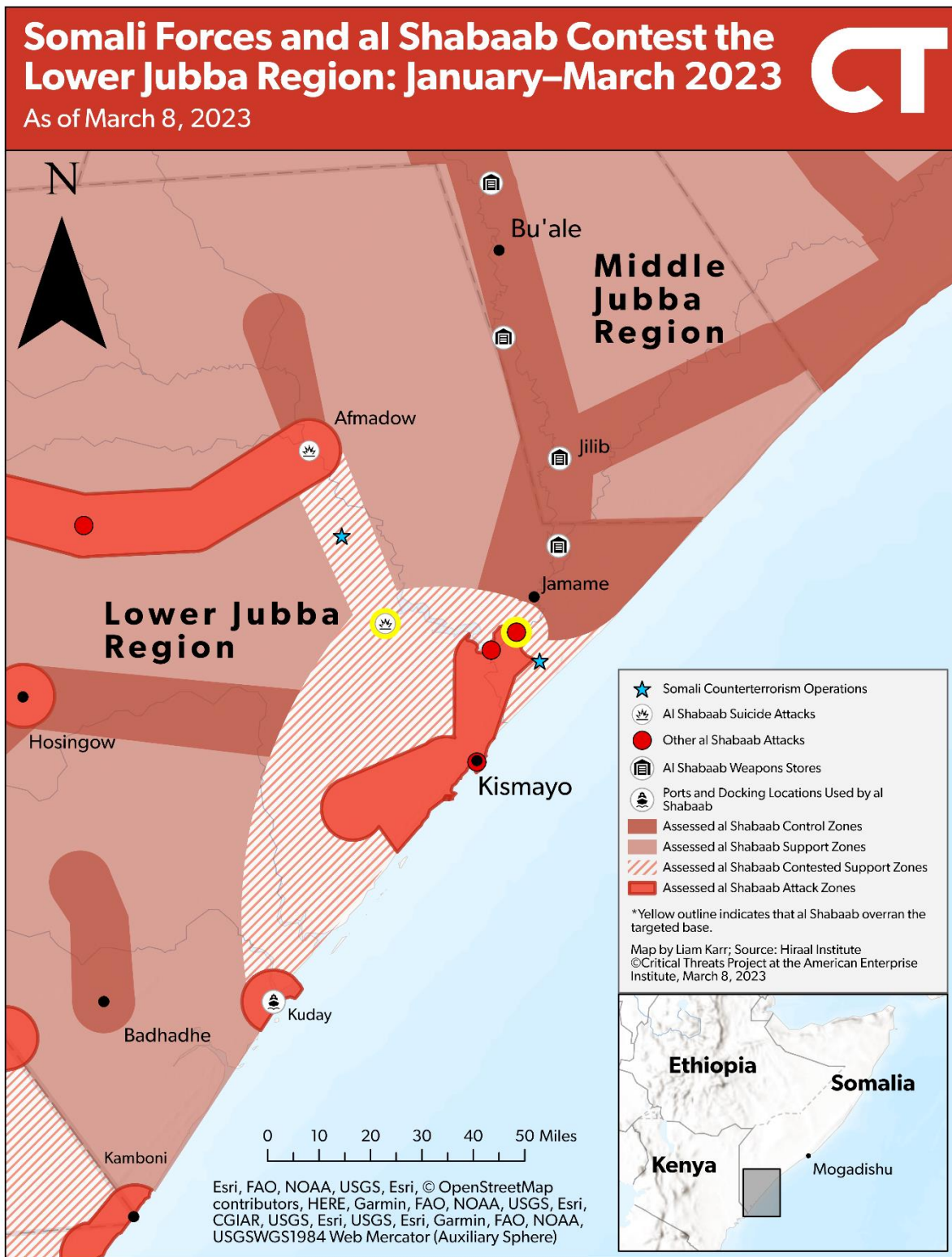
The SFG will likely be able to contest significant portions of southern Somalia’s Lower Jubba region during the offensive because of competent and well-equipped clearing forces. Al Shabaab repeatedly retreated from major population centers during the SFG’s central Somalia offensive to launch counterattacks at al Shabaab’s time of choosing, which made it easier for counterterrorism forces to contest and clear some areas initially.²⁶ US-trained Danab forces are also active in the Lower Jubba region. These forces are effective clearing forces and benefit from US drone support.²⁷ The Djiboutian, Ethiopian, and Kenyan forces have also shown to be well-trained, well-equipped, and capable clearing forces during their previous deployments in Somalia.²⁸

Somali officials have stated that their ultimate goal is to retake al Shabaab-controlled areas of the Middle Jubba region, but the SFG will likely fail to penetrate Middle Jubba because of strong al Shabaab resistance.²⁹ Middle Jubba is al Shabaab’s heartland, containing a significant portion of the group’s infrastructure and high-ranking leadership.³⁰ The group launched numerous large-scale attacks as Somali forces began to pressure al Shabaab-controlled areas in central Somalia during the SFG’s 2022 offensive and eventually halted the counterterrorism forces’ progress.³¹ Al Shabaab will put up greater resistance around the Middle Jubba region than it did in central Somalia.³² The group has already launched several large-scale attacks in 2023 to temporarily overrun bases that Somali forces planned to use for operations into Middle Jubba, including a staging area Somali forces established in January.³³ Somali forces have demonstrated they cannot withstand these large-scale attacks. It is unclear if international partners are willing to sustain the losses these attacks inflict, which makes it unlikely anti-al Shabaab forces can bear the cost it will take to successfully pressure Middle Jubba.

An SFG offensive into Lower Jubba could weaken al Shabaab and set conditions for future offensives in Middle Jubba by damaging al Shabaab’s military and economic strength in Lower Jubba. Somali and partner forces could break al Shabaab’s control over the district capitals Badhadhe and Jamame in Lower Jubba, which would deny al Shabaab access to its Lower Jubba weapon stores and smuggling ports, disrupt support zones that link its weapon stores in Middle Jubba to Lower Jubba, and decrease its tax revenues.³⁴

The SFG will likely struggle to hold newly contested areas over the following year because it lacks enough well-trained or well-equipped forces to hold terrain. Somali forces in central Somalia have relied on local militias as holding forces, but the SFG does not have this option in southern Somalia, where clan ties and grievances against al Shabaab have not mobilized locals to combat the group.³⁵ African Union forces do not have the capacity to expand their operations to newly liberated areas and are scheduled to decrease their numbers before their planned withdrawal at the end of 2024.³⁶ The remaining Somali and international partner forces are either not designated for stabilization and holding activities or are poorly prepared to perform such functions due to a lack of training and equipment.³⁷ Newly deployed Eritrean-trained Somali National Army forces are present in Lower Jubba and could be adequate holding forces in newly contested areas.³⁸ It is unclear how well trained and equipped these troops are.³⁹

Figure 3. Somali Forces and al Shabaab Contest the Lower Jubba Region: January–March 2023

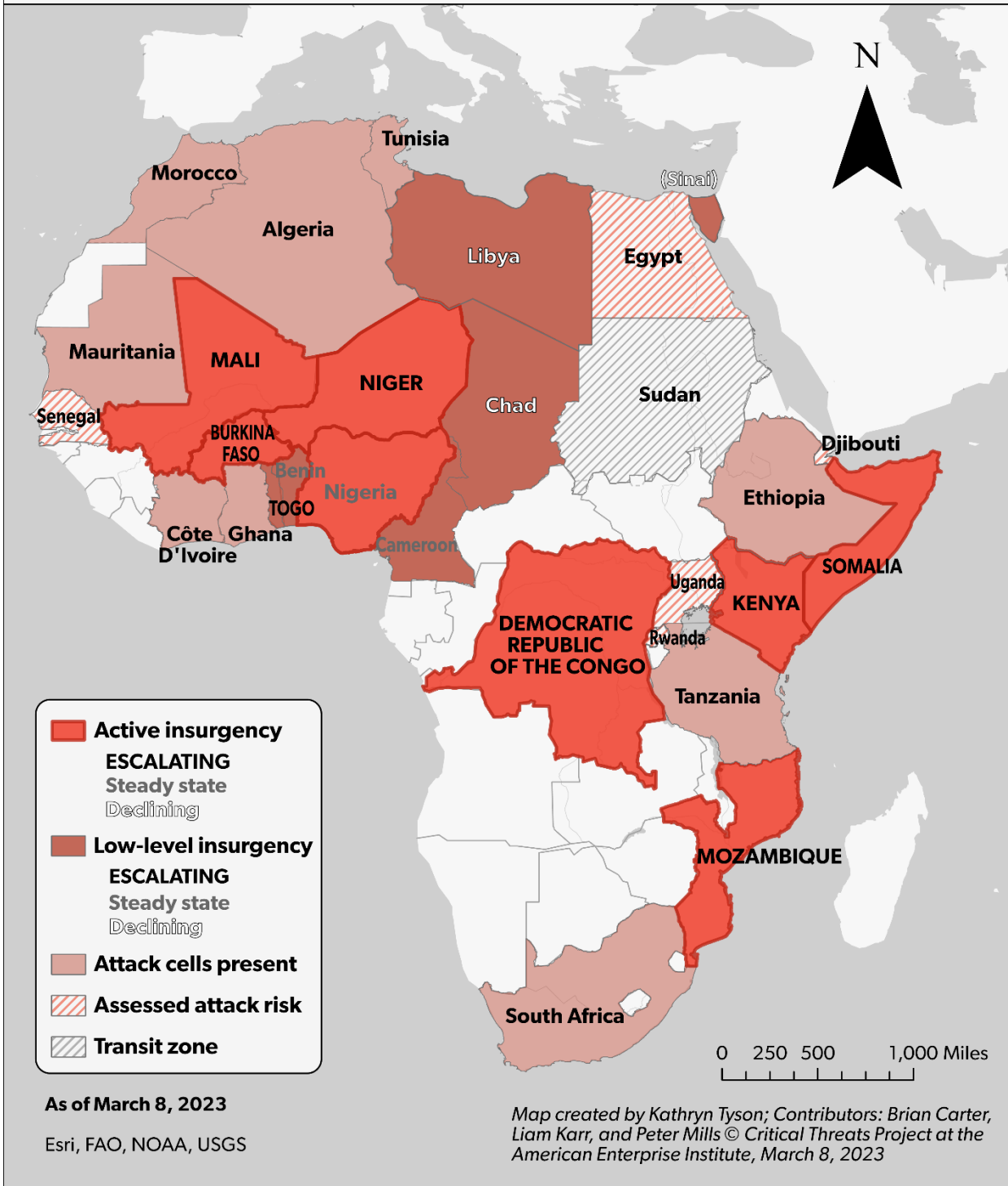


Source: Liam Karr and the Hiraal Institute.⁴⁰

Figure 4. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

As of March 2023



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Afghanistan. ISKP may be increasing its attacks targeting civilians associated with the Taliban government. ISKP gunmen assassinated the head of the Herat municipal water supply on March 8, indicating a shift to targeting lower-level civilian government employees.⁴¹ ISKP typically targets Taliban soldiers, high-level officials, and religious minorities. ISKP released a Pashto statement on March 5 criticizing the Taliban for killing women and children during Taliban counter-ISKP

operations and threatened to begin targeting Taliban members' families.⁴² This threat followed a Taliban counter-ISKP raid in Herat that reportedly killed a woman affiliated with ISKP along with several other suspected ISKP members.⁴³

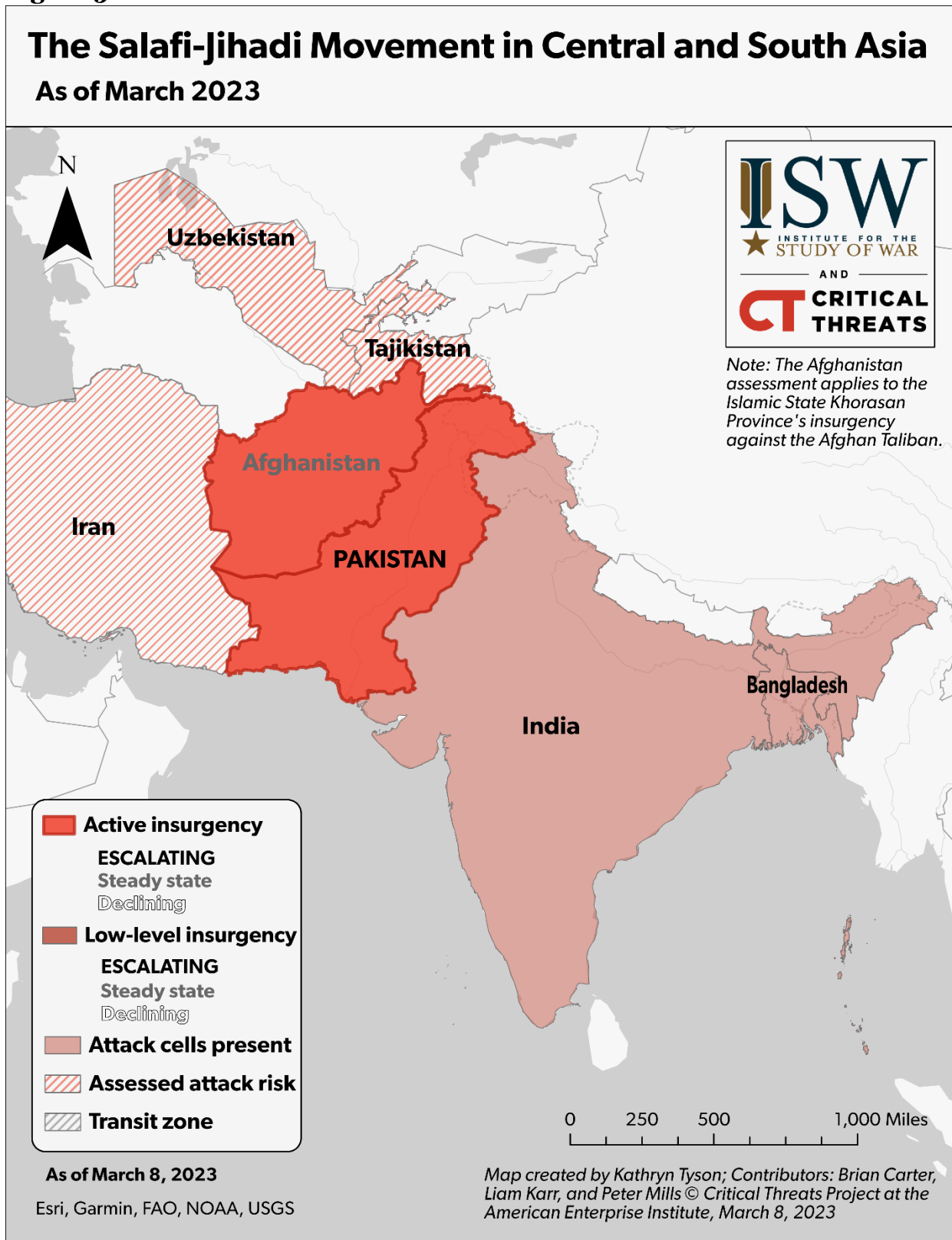
The Taliban may respond to increased ISKP attacks on civilians with more aggressive counter-ISKP operations to prevent attacks on Taliban civilians and family members. The Taliban do not have the capability to protect every lower-level civilian government employee. Prior Taliban operations targeting suspected ISKP supporters resulted in widespread torture and extrajudicial executions of civilians.⁴⁴ Similar methods as part of more aggressive counter-ISKP operations could increase discontent toward the Taliban government, foment further instability in Afghanistan, and increase support for anti-Taliban groups, including ISKP.

India. ISKP may be unable to replace its leader for operations in India for several months. The Afghan Taliban killed ISKP leader for India operations Ahangar in Kabul on February 14.⁴⁵ Ahangar likely had established contacts in India as the former leader of the Islamic State's Indian affiliate, Islamic State Hind Province (ISHP).⁴⁶ CTP assumes ISKP aims to replace Ahangar with someone with similar connections to ISHP. ISHP lacks a formal hierarchy, which may complicate ISKP efforts to find a qualified replacement.⁴⁷ Ahangar was also valuable because he was based in Afghanistan, where he recruited Indians to carry out ISKP operations, including attacks in Kabul and Jalalabad in 2020.⁴⁸ A replacement may be hesitant to travel to Afghanistan and support similar attacks after the Taliban's counter-ISKP raids.

ISKP claimed two 2022 attacks in India, possibly to message its capabilities after the loss of Ahangar. ISKP claimed on March 4 it had been responsible for two small-scale attacks in southern India in October and November.⁴⁹ An ISKP attack in India would represent a significant expansion of ISKP's recent attack zones in Afghanistan and Pakistan. ISKP has never attacked in India, and the group's recent activity in the country appears to be focused on recruitment.⁵⁰ Claiming the attacks so long after they occurred suggests ISKP is attempting to mitigate the effect of Ahangar's death on recruiting efforts in India.

ISKP is likely overstating its role in the attacks. Indian security forces investigated Islamic State links to the attacks but did not verify these links or specify the attackers and their group affiliations.⁵¹ ISKP did not release any new information about the attacks or attackers and provided an incorrect location for one of the attacks.⁵² The months-long gap between the attacks further suggests ISKP was not directly involved in the attack.

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



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Africa

Sahel. Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) Emir Abu Ubaydha Yusuf al Anabi downplayed the global links of al Qaeda's Sahelian affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wa al Muslimeen (JNIM) in an interview with France 24 released on March 6.⁵³ Anabi reiterated that AQIM and JNIM are focused on expelling foreign powers, including Kremlin-linked Wagner Group mercenaries. He also deemphasized the groups' global ties by avoiding explicitly calling for hijra, not answering a question about his role in the global al Qaeda structure, and avoiding a question about the late al Qaeda Emir Ayman al Zawahiri.⁵⁴ Anabi did not discuss his global links, likely to avoid unwanted Western scrutiny and intervention and not because the group does not have global connections and global aims.⁵⁵ AQIM and JNIM still aspire to have transnational attack capabilities but are focusing on encouraging rather than conducting such attacks.⁵⁶ Anabi also made it clear that JNIM will continue to consolidate control in its current area of operations and expand into the Gulf of Guinea through its locally attuned approaches.

¹ Author's research.

² Author's research; <https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1VubVoZdI1rnqMlfAkmBECat-mpWZOEIA&ll=34.5404650306139%2C39.287573491406306&z=8>

³ Author's research.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1632019945436372992?s=20>; author's research

⁵ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1632082081051279361?s=20>; <https://www.rfi.fr/en/middle-east/20230308-treat-dipped-in-blood-syrians-risk-their-lives-for-truffles>; <https://apnews.com/article/politics-syria-government-iraq-beirut-24b8cc5c050156457b1166503aa9ef36>

⁷ <https://www.rfi.fr/en/middle-east/20230308-treat-dipped-in-blood-syrians-risk-their-lives-for-truffles>

⁸ Author's research.

⁹ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>

¹⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-8-2023>

¹¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-8-2023>

¹² Author's research.

¹³ <https://npasyria.com/144218>

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¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1627072236460072973?s=20>;

<https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1626663627196358678?s=20>

¹⁶ <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/east-mediterranean-mena/syria/containing-resilient-isis-central-and-north>

¹⁷ <https://sdf-press.com/?p=39441>;

<https://twitter.com/centcom/status/1626618891404189696?s=46&t=LzTypxEnQKgRIA1wYq7pSA>;

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¹⁸ <https://twitter.com/CENTCOM/status/1608441432871952384?s=20>;

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¹⁹ <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-prison-attack-and-the-death-of-its-leader-weighing-up-the-islamic-states-trajectory-in-syria>

²⁰ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-january-25-2023>;

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²¹ <https://www.voanews.com/a/somalia-s-neighbors-to-send-additional-troops-to-fight-al-shabab-/6986748.html>;

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²³ <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/ethiopia-sends-non-atmis-troops-to-somalia-in-fight-against-al-shabaab>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-37775555>; <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2016/country-chapters/somalia>

²⁵ <https://twitter.com/US2SOMALIA/status/1630593055408439296?s=20>

²⁶ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-january-18-2023>

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/27/us/politics/somalia-commandos-counterterrorism.html>

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-16372453>; <https://www.reuters.com/article/somalia-conflict-idAFL5E8DMB7G20120222>

²⁹ <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somalia-al-shabaab-neutralized-in-jubaland-state>

³⁰ <https://www.africom.mil/what-we-do/airstrikes/2020-airstrikes>; <https://hiraalinstitute.so/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Al-Shabaabs-Arsenal-From-Taxes-to-Terror-Web.pdf>; <https://www.caasimada.net/sawirro-al-shabaab-oo-isbitaal-weyn-ka-furtay-jilib>

³¹ <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-february-15-2023>;
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³² <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/salafi-jihadi-movement-weekly-update-february-15-2023>;
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³³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalias-al-shabaab-recaptures-base-it-lost-military-offensive-2023-03-07>; SITE Intelligence Group, “Shabaab Provides Extensive Photo Documentation for Aftermath of Offensive Leaving 89 Killed,” March 8, 2023, available by subscription at www.siteintelgroup.com; <https://radioisala.com/faq-faahin-al-shabaab-oo-weeraray-saldhig-kuyaalla-jubbada-hoose-khasaaro-ka-dhashay>; SITE Intelligence Group, “UPDATE: Shabaab Claims 110+ Casualties in Suicide Bombings, Major Offensives on Multiple Bases in Southern Somalia,” February 11, 2023, available by subscription at www.siteintelgroup.com

³⁴ <https://hiraalinstitute.so/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Al-Shabaabs-Arsenal-From-Taxes-to-Terror-Web.pdf>

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

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³⁹ <https://www.caasimada.net/xog-kun-ka-mid-ah-askarta-lagu-soo-tababaray-dalka-eritrea-oo-la-geynayo>;
<https://www.voanews.com/a/first-batch-of-somali-troops-trained-in-eritrea-arrives-home-/6885944.html>

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⁴¹ <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1633460488632950784>;
<https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/163355240610938880>;
https://twitter.com/N_M_Haqqani/status/1633418873683730432;
<https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1633547179049492487>

⁴² <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1632741455419650050>

⁴³ <https://twitter.com/AfghanAnalyst2/status/1631743000438030337>; <http://www.dotafghanistansun.com/news/273591113/afghan-security-forces-kill-6-is-militants-in-western-herat>

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⁴⁵ <https://twitter.com/abdsayed/status/1630267445930852353>

⁴⁶ <https://twitter.com/khorasandiary/status/1630274040144306177>

⁴⁷ <https://extremism.gwu.edu/india-jihadist-landscape-and-islamic-state-hind-province>

⁴⁸ <https://theprint.in/india/top-kashmir-jihad-commander-who-led-indian-suicide-bombers-in-afghan-is-attacks-believed-killed/1385976/>; <https://www.indiatoday.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>

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