

Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, March 22, 2023

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

Key Takeaways:

Iraq and Syria. ISIS increased attacks targeting a pro-regime tribe north of Deir ez Zor city, Syria, to drive a wedge between regime forces and tribal fighters in the area. ISIS is attempting to illustrate the regime's inability or unwillingness to support the tribe, which has had a troubled relationship with regime forces in the past. ISIS likely exploited the relief and replacement of regime forces north of Deir ez Zor city to increase its attacks, indicating the group's continued tactical and organizational expertise.

Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Islamic State has used its global network to rapidly grow its affiliate based in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The group's growth demonstrates the danger the IS global network poses by enabling terror groups across Africa, and its regional aims threaten nearby US counterterrorism partners, which could jeopardize counterterrorism missions elsewhere in Africa. Diverging interests between regional security forces likely will prevent Congolese and Ugandan forces from containing or defeating the group. The shortcomings of regional and US efforts to degrade the group and the global IS network increase the likelihood this group will continue to strengthen its threat to US and African interests in central and southern Africa.

Pakistan. Pakistani government officials are attempting to use the security situation in northwestern Pakistan to delay elections for the foreseeable future. The governor for Khyber Pakhtunkwa province said on March 17 that the regional government will postpone provincial elections until Pakistan addresses the expansion of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). Pakistan has held elections in this region during periods of significantly higher TTP activity, indicating that the postponement is due to political conflicts rather than the TTP threat.

Assessments:

Iraq and Syria. ISIS is escalating attacks targeting Albu Saraya tribesmen in Syrian regime-controlled northern Deir ez Zor province, Syria. ISIS attacks are primarily targeting Albu Saraya shepherds and Albu Saraya elements with the National Defense Forces north of Deir ez Zor city.¹ The Albu Saraya organized anti-ISIS sweeping operations in the Deir ez Zor desert on March 3 and March 10–12, though these operations are ineffective.² ISIS attacks continued following these sweeping operations, illustrating their ineffectiveness.³

ISIS is likely targeting Albu Saraya tribesmen to drive a wedge between regime forces and Iranian proxies and the Albu Saraya. ISIS's campaign is targeting Albu Saraya tribesmen to illustrate the inability or unwillingness of nearby regime forces to support the tribe. The Albu Saraya has a historically frayed relationship with regime forces, though it is also vehemently anti-ISIS.⁴ However, recent regime behavior may have exacerbated the local tensions. The 4th Division executed two Albu Saraya members in Ayyash, north of Deir ez Zor city, on February 21.⁵ The 4th Division's behavior likely prompted the regime to replace the unit with the 17th Division north of Deir ez Zor on March 1 and pay blood money to the tribe as a form of damage control.⁶ The regime and its Iranian allies have only supported one Albu Saraya clearing operation since March 1 and abandoned Albu Saraya truffle harvesters after an ISIS assault targeting the harvesters on March 19.⁷ The Albu Saraya has had a poor relationship with the 17th Division in the past because the division has been unwilling to protect and

support the tribe.⁸ ISIS has previously exploited tension between local regime forces and Abu Saraya fighters to create mistrust the group could exploit.⁹

The transfer of control north of Deir ez Zor from the 4th Division to the 17th Division likely provided an opportunity for ISIS to escalate attacks before the 17th Division was prepared for operations. ISIS attacks targeting the Abu Saraya in the 17th division's new area of operations began March 3 when ISIS killed several Abu Saraya shepherds.¹⁰ The replacement of a counterinsurgent force with a new unit typically causes significant disruption to counterinsurgent operations because the new force needs time to build relationships with local communities and learn about new areas of operation.

ISIS's reaction to regime troop movements indicates the group's ability to quickly exploit opportunities to set conditions for its success. The group's ability to recognize and react to a transfer of control within regime forces illustrates its remaining organizational and tactical expertise. Its inability to eliminate mid- or senior-level ISIS commanders in regime-held areas means the group's leaders will continue to build this tactical expertise as they solidify the central Syrian desert as an ISIS sanctuary.

ISIS Propaganda Efforts in Iraq. ISIS's propaganda in Iraq is representing historically low ISIS attack rates there by stressing its continued relevance in Iraq ahead of Ramadan, which begins on March 22. The group released a full-page opinion piece on March 16, casting recent US Central Command body counts as documenting "American . . . failure and lies."¹¹ The op-ed mirrors similar propaganda the group has issued since mid-February 2023.¹² An Islamic State-linked media outfit, Sawt al Zarqawi, called on ISIS fighters and supporters to "double [their] efforts and ignite the earth beneath . . . the disbelievers" ahead of Ramadan.¹³ CTP assesses with low confidence that Sawt al Zarqawi could be affiliated with Iraqi ISIS media cells. Abu Musab al Zarqawi was the original leader of ISIS's predecessor, al Qaeda in Iraq.

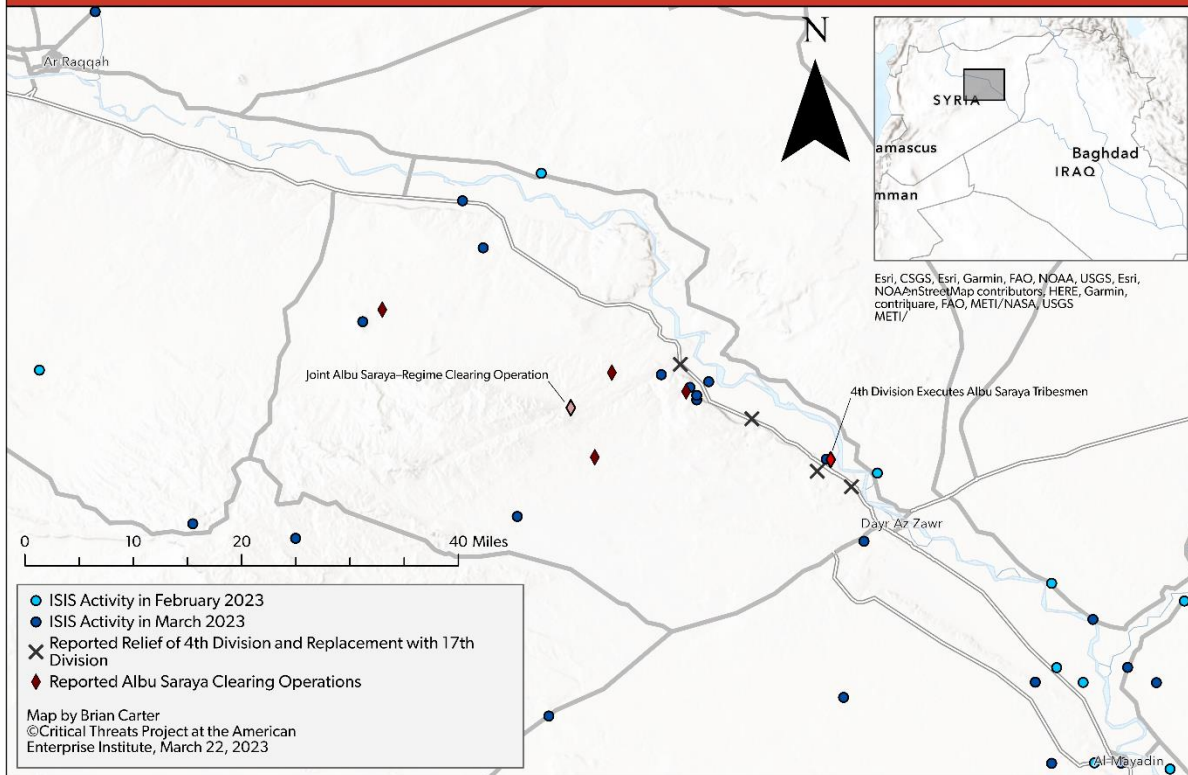
ISIS is using its propaganda to give the impression of strength while explaining a lack of attack claims. ISIS threatened Iraqi Security Forces after two attacks on February 27 and March 8 by claiming that ISIS was the hunter and not the hunted.¹⁴ ISIS also asserted that its attack claims are "limited" due to concerns over operational security and logistical limitations in submitting attack information to ISIS's media operatives.¹⁵

ISIS almost certainly does not under claim its attacks in Iraq, though it does neglect to claim attacks in certain areas, such as Deraa, Syria, and the central Syrian desert.¹⁶ ISIS attacks are at historic lows in Iraq due in part because the Iraqi army and Counter-Terrorism Service have proven capable of eliminating mid-level ISIS leadership who would be responsible for planning and executing major attacks and campaigns.¹⁷ ISIS seeks to claim as many attacks as possible to illustrate its strength and relevance to possible recruits.¹⁸

Figure 1. ISIS Activity and Regime Response North of Deir ez Zor City, February 1 to March 21, 2023

ISIS Activity and Regime Response North of Deir ez Zor City

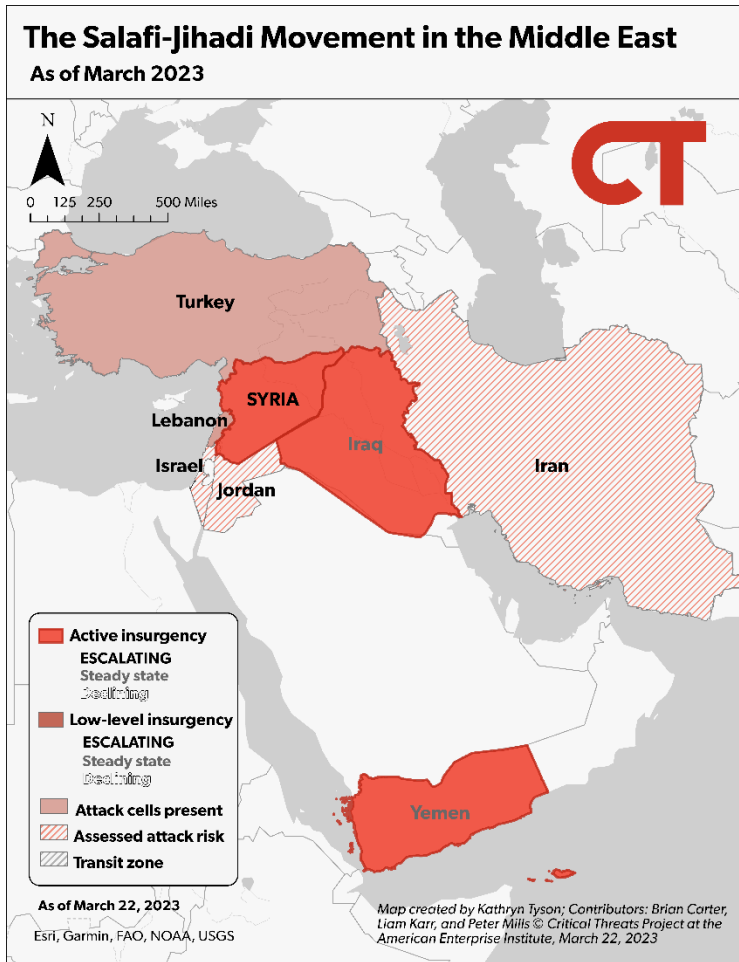
February 1, 2023, to March 21, 2023



Note: Some of the locations on this map are approximate. CTP defines “attacks” as kinetic activity, including assassinations, armed assaults on military positions, executions, and bombings. “Activity” includes all forms of ISIS activity, including attacks, force movements, and reports of governance activity like zakat collection. ISIS does not generally report on these non-kinetic activities and does not claim all of its attacks.

Source: Brian Carter.

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



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Islamic State has leveraged its global network to rapidly grow its DRC-based affiliate. The group's current leader took charge in 2016, quickly began espousing global jihadist ideology, and grew ties to IS before becoming the Islamic State Central Africa Province (ISCAP-DRC) in 2019.¹⁹ IS has used important logistical cells in Somalia and South Africa to support ISCAP-DRC and build the group's capabilities.²⁰ With assistance from IS, ISCAP-DRC began carrying out suicide-vest bombings, operating surveillance drones, and creating special barracks to handle an influx in foreign fighters by 2021.²¹

Support for ISCAP-DRC from the IS global network demonstrates the threat the network poses in enabling various terrorist groups in Africa. IS-Somalia sent trainers, media officials, and other operatives to the DRC no later than 2021.²² US raids against the network's key logistical nodes, such as a recent raid that killed a high-ranking IS-Somalia leader and facilitator, cause only short-term disruptions to the network.²³ The US killed the previous deputy leader in a 2019 airstrike, but this did not stop the support that reached ISCAP-DRC.²⁴ IS also uses South Africa as a financing and recruiting hub.²⁵ IS presence in South Africa provides the group with unique access to money and technology that IS facilitators can send to ISIS cells in other theaters.

ISCAP-DRC has regional ambitions that could threaten the counterterrorism efforts of US partners, such as Rwanda and Uganda, elsewhere in Africa. ISCAP-DRC cells attempted to carry out attacks in both countries in

2021, though it was only successful in Uganda.²⁶ Rwanda and Uganda are vital counterterrorism partners that underpin efforts to degrade the Islamic State affiliate in Mozambique and al Shabaab in Somalia, respectively.²⁷

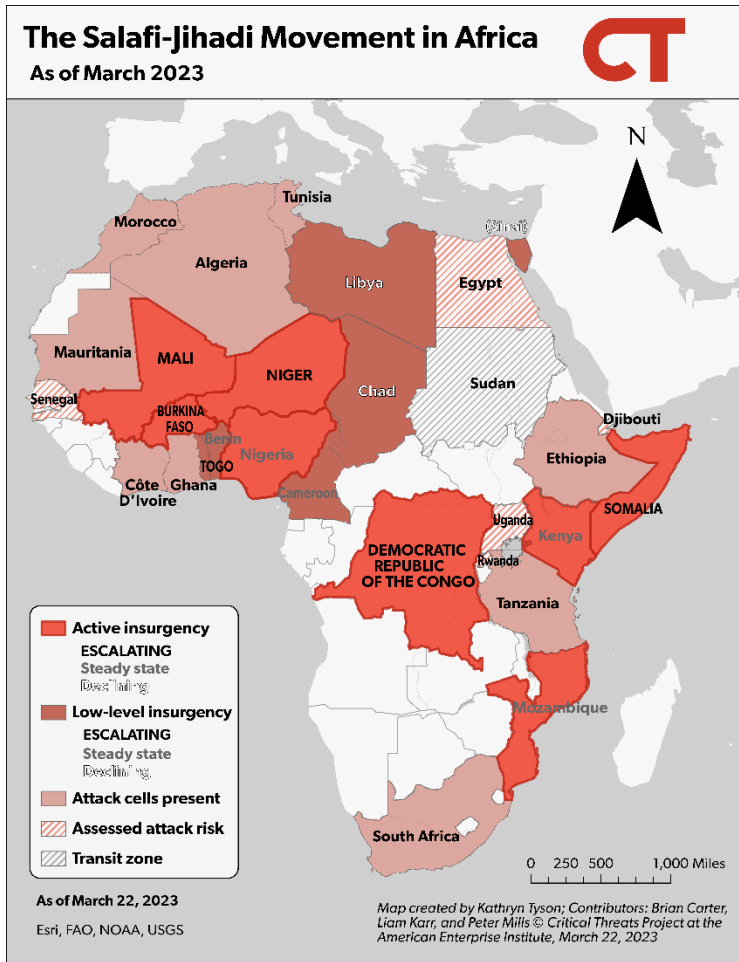
A greater threat from ISCAP-DRC could lead Rwanda and Uganda to give less priority to these other counterterrorism efforts. This scenario is unlikely because ISCAP-DRC cells have not been capable of generating large enough internal threats to warrant abandoning other theaters. However, the large number of foreign fighters from nearby countries operating in the DRC risks fighters eventually returning to their home areas and forming insurgent cells as IS has done in other theaters.²⁸ ISCAP-DRC also has cells in South Africa and Tanzania that it uses to recruit foreign fighters, but there is no evidence these recruiting cells have attack capabilities.²⁹

Ugandan forces and their Congolese partners are unlikely to contain ISCAP-DRC given their divergent interests and lack of capacity. The inability of the DRC central government and armed forces to project power into northeastern DRC has historically encouraged Rwanda, Uganda, and a myriad of armed groups to compete for spheres of influence over the resource-rich area.³⁰ Uganda has deployed forces to combat ISCAP-DRC in northeastern DRC since November 2021, but it allegedly waited months before initially sending them so that the deployment would line up with its readiness to begin a road-building project in the eastern DRC.³¹ Uganda only invaded at the border crossing where the road-building project started instead of trying to corner ISCAP-DRC from multiple directions.³²

Uganda has primarily directed its operations at border security, which has not contained or degraded the insurgency.³³ Rwanda viewed Uganda's entry to the DRC in 2021 as infringing on its own economic and security interests, which likely prompted Rwanda to support separatist rebels with ethnic ties to the Rwandan ruling party fighting further south to counterbalance the increase in Ugandan influence.³⁴ Congolese forces are now presumably focusing on these rebels—who pose a greater territorial threat—further exacerbating their capacity issues and reducing counterterrorism pressure on ISCAP-DRC.³⁵

The lack of effective pressure on ISCAP-DRC likely will allow the group to continue strengthening while increasing its threat regionally and globally. The group has proven resilient to regional counterterrorism efforts by relocating, which allows it to expand its area of operations to the benefit of its propaganda and reestablish support zones from which it can continue growing its capabilities.³⁶ This is unlikely to change due to the multilayered crisis in the eastern DRC and regional politics underlying the intervention.³⁷ The US targeting and sanctioning strategy has also proven insufficient to slow support to this group and others on the African continent.³⁸ These actions temporarily hinder IS support chains but are not sustained enough to sufficiently disrupt the network in the long term.

Figure 4. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa



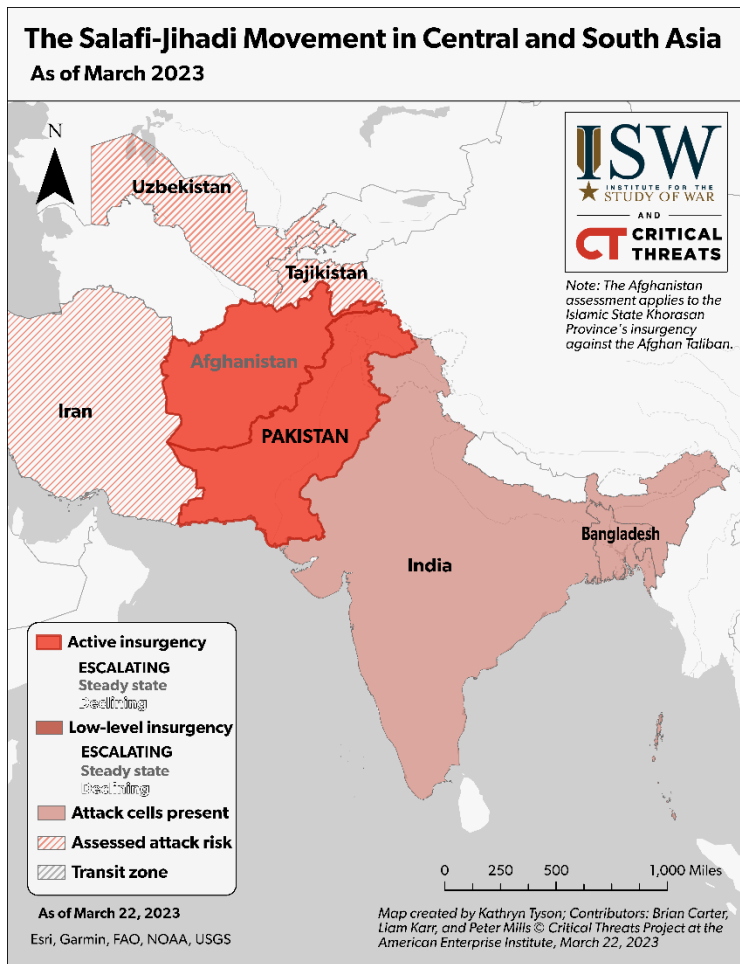
Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Pakistan. Pakistani government officials are attempting to use the insecurity in northwestern Pakistan to delay elections for the foreseeable future. The governor for Khyber Pakhtunkwa province Haji Ghulam Ali said on March 17 that the regional government will postpone provincial elections until Pakistani political and military leadership address the expansion of TTP shadow governance in the region.³⁹ Ali said on March 14 that elections would be held in late May but backtracked on this statement and did not provide a new date, suggesting that elections will be delayed indefinitely.⁴⁰

Pakistan has held elections in Khyber Pakhtunkwa during previous periods of significantly higher TTP activity, indicating that the postponement is likely due to political conflicts rather than the TTP threat.⁴¹ Khyber Pakhtunkwa held provincial elections in 2008 and 2013, when the TTP controlled swaths of land in the region. There have been few concrete indicators of greater TTP governance since December 2022, when the group announced appointments for new TTP ministries. The appointments included ministries for politics, judiciary affairs, and education. The decision demonstrates that the TTP seeks to formalize and expand its governance structures, but so far these efforts do not appear to have materialized. The TTP has escalated attacks against Pakistani security forces since ending a cease-fire with the Pakistani government in November 2022, including a significant bombing in Peshawar in January.⁴² However, the TTP has conducted major attacks significantly less frequently than during other periods when Khyber Pakhtunkwa held elections.⁴³

Ali announced the delay likely because he opposes efforts by the Tehrik-e-Insaf (PTI) political party to hold early provincial elections. There may be rifts between Ali and the Khyber Pakhtunkwa chief minister, who also serves as a senior member of the PTI.⁴⁴ The PTI dissolved the Khyber Pakhtunkwa assembly in January 2023 to push provincial elections and secure support for the party before general elections in October 2023. Provincial and general elections have occurred at the same time in previous years.⁴⁵ The Khyber Pakhtunkwa police chief reiterated Ali's statements on March 17 and added that separate provincial and national elections will double police expenditure and increase the risk of TTP attacks.⁴⁶ The PTI threatened to file court charges against Ali on March 19 in response to the decision.⁴⁷ No other Pakistani political or military leadership has publicly commented on Ali's claims. It is possible that senior Pakistani officials are not commenting to avoid drawing attention to Pakistan's military failures.

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



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Asia

Pakistan. Unknown militants killed senior Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) official Mustafa Kamal Barki in Angoor Ada, South Waziristan, in northwestern Pakistan on March 21.⁴⁸ The militants ambushed Barki's convoy, leading to a firefight that killed the ISI leader and injured seven other security-force

members.⁴⁹ The attack marks the second killing of a senior ISI official since January 2023, when a TTP militant killed the ISI deputy director in Khanewl in northeastern Pakistan.⁵⁰ The TTP may have been responsible for the killing of Barki. The TTP regularly attacks in South Waziristan. Barki was also reportedly involved in peace talks between Pakistan and the TTP in 2022, which some TTP members opposed.⁵¹

¹ Authors' research; <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1631721427966791680?s=20>

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- ² <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1632421292942008322?s=20>
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<https://twitter.com/nahermedia/status/1638181073900142593?s=20>
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- ⁵ <https://www.syriahr.com/%D9%84%D8%AE%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%87%D9%85-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%80-%D9%80%D9%87%D9%80-%D9%80%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%80-%D9%80%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%85%D9%80-%D9%80%D9%86/589344>
- ⁶ https://orient-news.net/ar/news_show/202203; <https://nahermedia.net/%D8%A8%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A9%D9%90-%D8%B5%D9%84%D8%AD%D9%8D-%D8%A7%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7>
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