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Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update, January 12, 2023

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Key Takeaways:

Syria. Deteriorating relationships between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local communities will likely advantage the Islamic State in Iraq and al Sham (ISIS) as it seeks to expand its shadow governance in eastern Syria. Tensions have spiked over reported SDF human rights abuses in communities it suspects of harboring ISIS fighters in Deir Ezzor province. ISIS is likely taking advantage of the SDF's abuse of civilians by retaliating against the SDF to promote itself as an alternative, while also using threats and intimidation to recruit local allies.

Somalia. Al Shabaab, al Qaeda's affiliate in Somalia, is attempting to push back an effort by Somali government and local forces to oust the group from positions in central Somalia. Somali forces, with US support, have removed al Shabaab from several strongholds in central and south-central Somalia. Al Shabaab is retaliating with attacks intended to pin Somali forces in their positions and intimidate local militias. The group is likely not pursuing negotiations with the Somali government, despite media reports of talks.

Afghanistan-Pakistan. An escalating insurgency in Pakistan is straining relations between the Pakistani government and the Taliban-led government in Afghanistan. The Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has increased attacks in Pakistan since November 2022. The TTP has ties to the Afghan Taliban and maintains havens inside Afghanistan. The relationship between the Afghan Taliban government and Pakistan has deteriorated over the past few months due to increasing border clashes and the Taliban government's failure to reign in TTP attacks targeting Pakistan. The Pakistani government is now likely considering a renewed military effort against the TTP to include strikes in Afghan territory. The Taliban government will seek to avoid open military conflict with Pakistan but will remain either unable or unwilling to restrict TTP operations targeting Pakistan from Afghanistan.

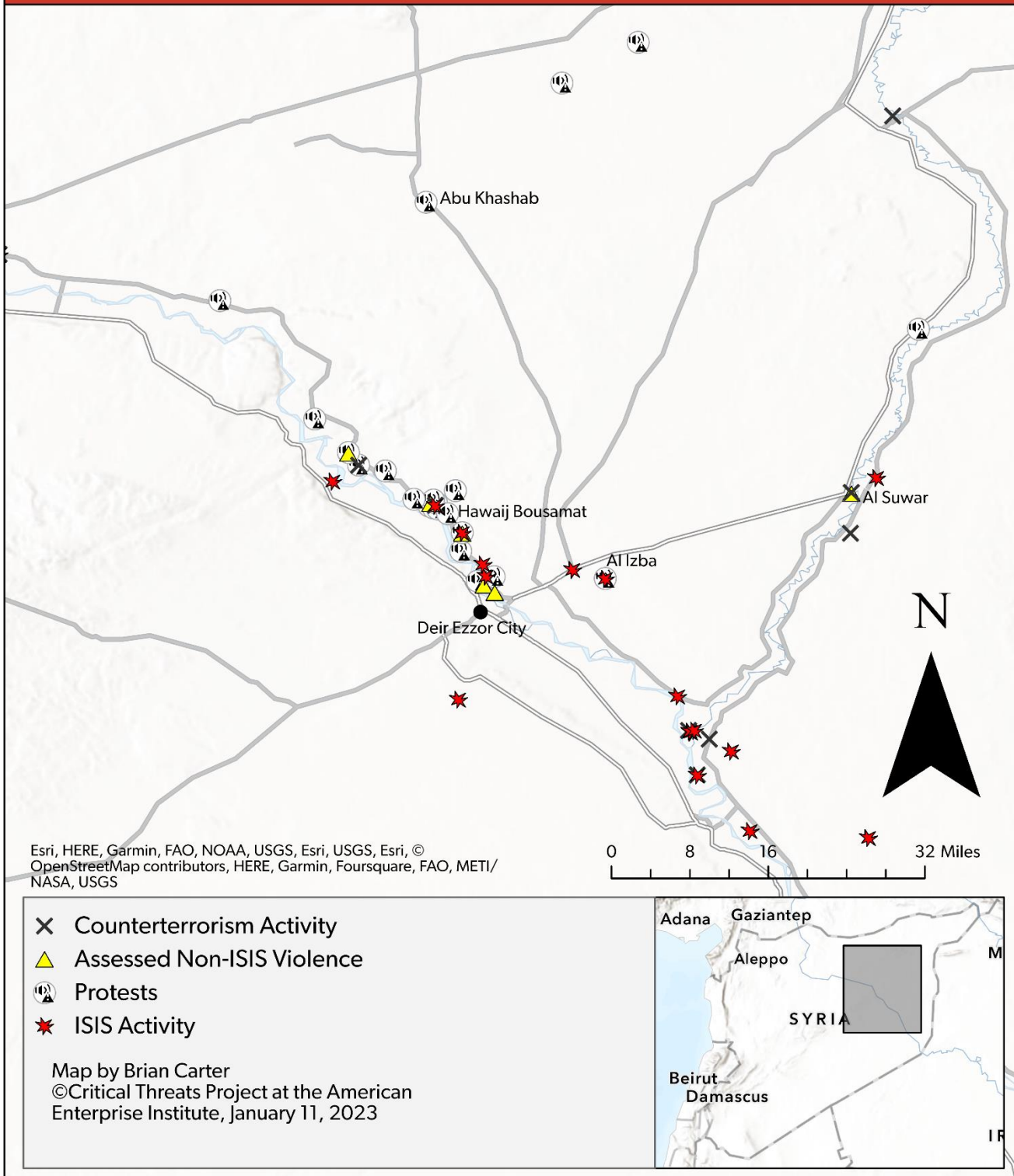
Assessments:

Syria. Deteriorating relations between the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and local communities are likely creating opportunities for ISIS to reassert its presence in eastern Syria's Deir Ezzor province. Arab SDF military officials in Deir Ezzor killed two women over a family dispute in December, spurring widespread unrest in Bakkara tribal territory in Deir Ezzor.¹ This incident is part of a trend of some SDF abuses of power that have included looting and abuse of civilians during counterterrorism raids.² ISIS likely enjoys some popular support in areas of Deir Ezzor and could exploit backlash against the SDF to expand its ability to impose governance. ISIS has previously imposed dress codes on women in Deir Ezzor and shut down a local civil council.³

Figure 1. Anti-SDF Protests and ISIS Activity in Northeastern Deir Ezzor

Anti-SDF Protests and ISIS Activity in Northeastern Deir Ezzor

December 20, 2022, to January 12, 2023

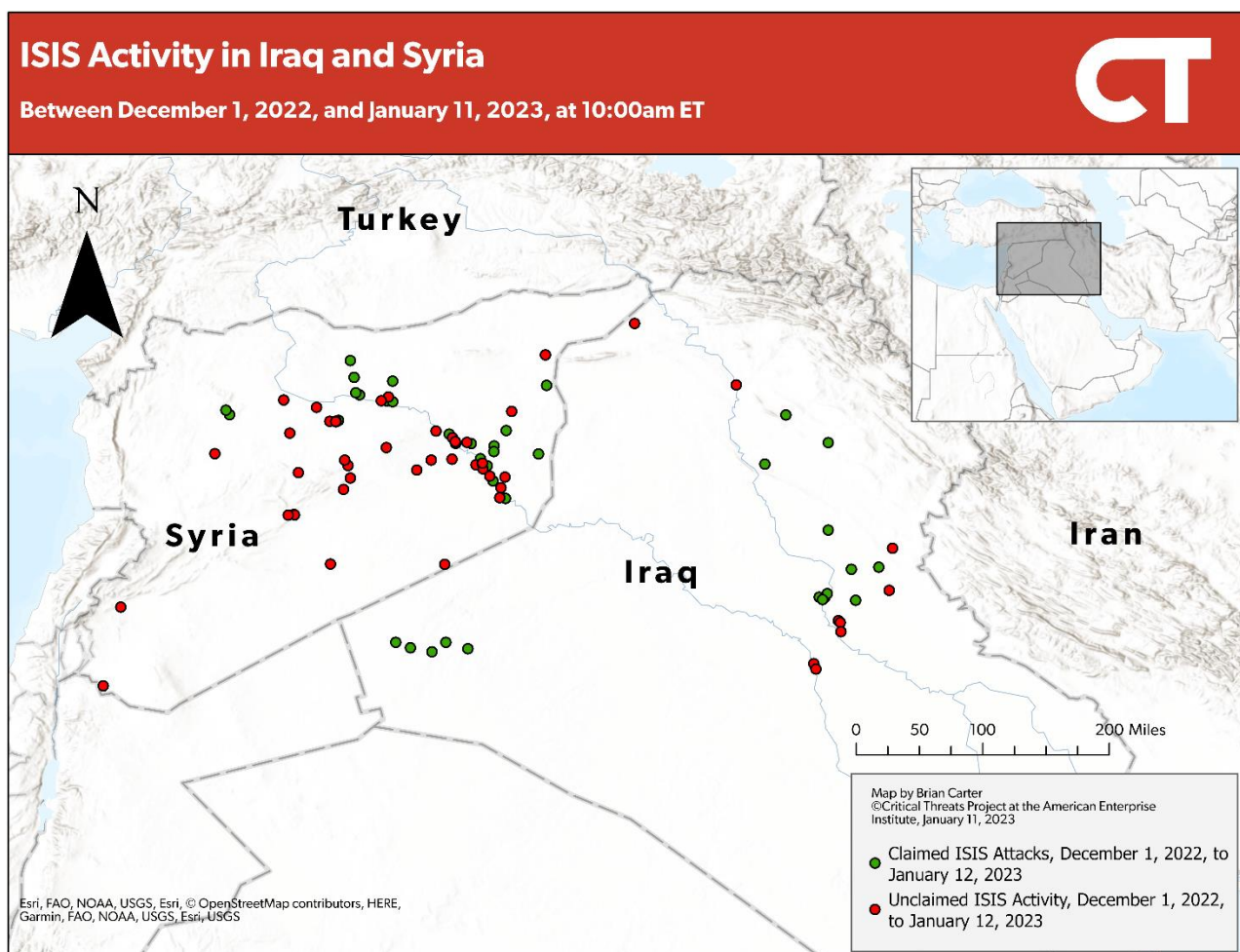


Source: Brian Carter.

The SDF's shortcomings contribute to ISIS's rebuilding efforts. The group is attempting to extend its shadow governance over civilian populations in Deir Ezzor.⁴ ISIS combines coercive and persuasive measures to encourage at least tacit civilian support for ISIS on the local level. ISIS may have responded to recent unrest by preventing SDF freedom of movement in Bakkara tribal territory by ambushing SDF forces and assassination SDF officials, thus presenting themselves as protectors of local actors.⁵ ISIS simultaneously threatens military and security officials, including coercing them to become informants.⁶

However, the SDF remains the most effective local counterterrorism force in Syria. The SDF frequently conducts counterterrorism operations with the support of the US-led coalition, leading to the arrest of ISIS fighters. By contrast, Syrian regime-backed forces in regime-controlled Deir Ezzor do not engage in effective counterterrorism operations. Regime-backed operations frequently consist of large sweeps in the central Syrian desert and are largely ineffective.⁷

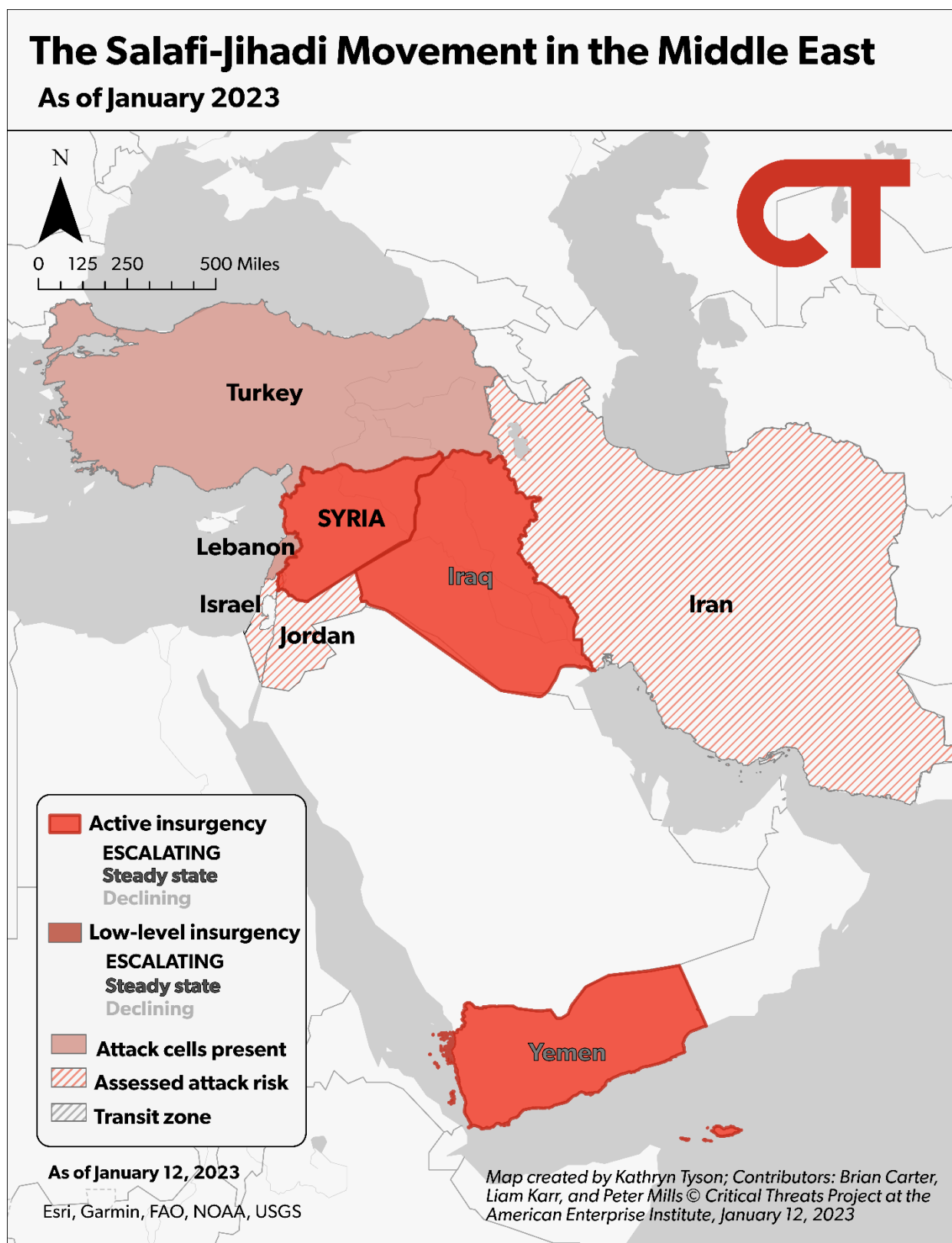
Figure 2. ISIS Activity in Iraq and Syria



Source: Brian Carter.

Note: 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.

Figure 3. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in the Middle East

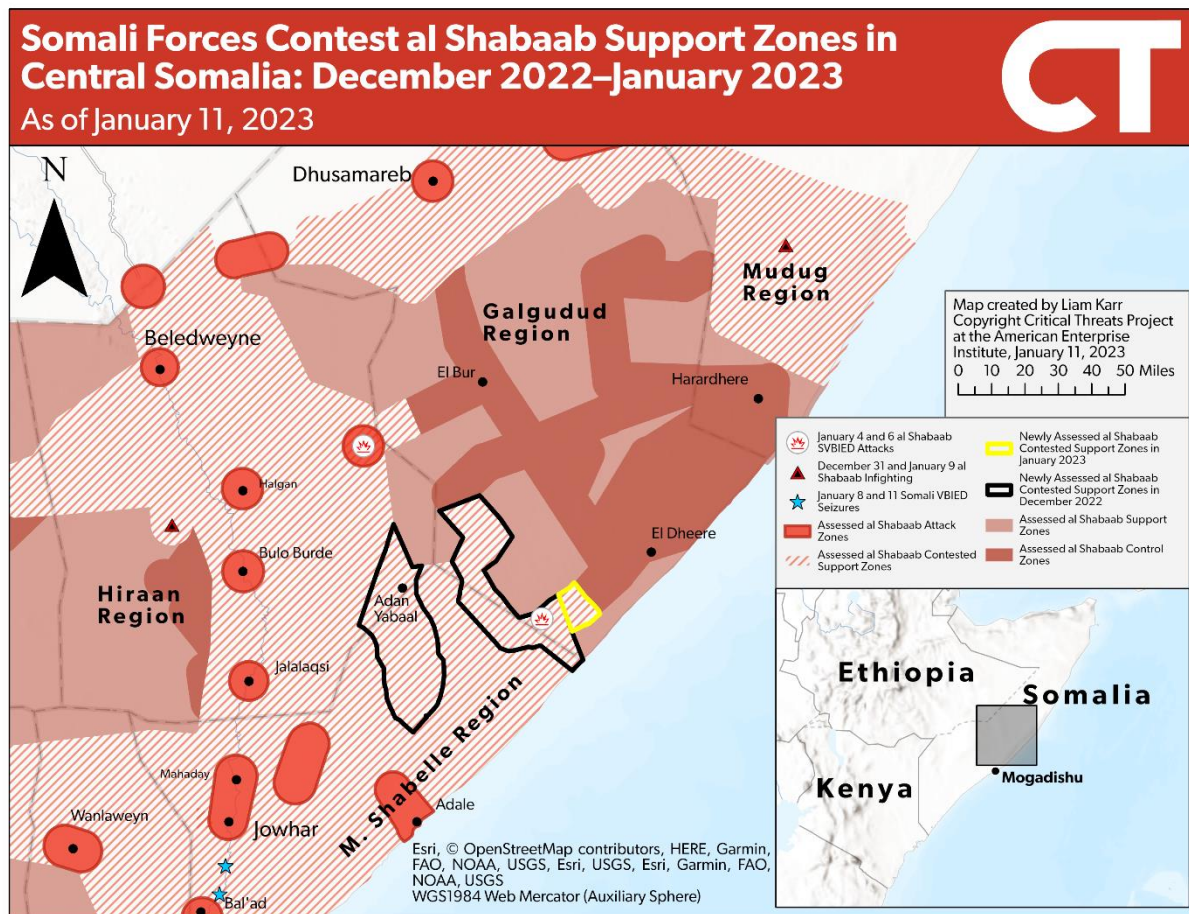


Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Somalia. Al Shabaab has escalated counterattacks in response to an ongoing Somali government-led offensive in central Somalia that began in the summer of 2022. Anti-al Shabaab forces are now

contesting more areas in central Somalia than they have since 2015. The Somali government began the offensive in June with the support of local clan militias that rebelled against al Shabaab for assassinating a prominent clan elder.⁸ The offensive accelerated and expanded in August and September after al Shabaab retaliatory attacks reinvigorated the Somali government effort and drew more clan militias into the fight.⁹ Anti-al Shabaab forces, with US and Turkish drone support, cleared al Shabaab strongholds from the eastern half of central Somalia's Hiraaan region in September and all of the Middle Shabelle region from October to December, and they began pushing into the southern district of the Galgudud region in late December.¹⁰

Figure 4. Somali Forces Contest al Shabaab Support Zones in Central Somalia: December 2022–January 2023



Source: Liam Karr.

Al Shabaab has launched a wave of suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (SVBIED) and kidnapping attacks in central Somalia to fracture the anti-al Shabaab coalition and regain momentum in central Somalia. Al Shabaab killed at least 41 people in two separate multi-SVBIED attacks in central Somalia on January 4 and 6, including its first large-scale complex suicide attack in central Somalia since November 2022.¹¹ Somali forces also captured four more unused vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) on January 8 and 11.¹² The SVBIED wave likely intends to break the morale of anti-al Shabaab forces, disrupt troop movements, and pin Somali forces in base towns.

Al Shabaab has supplemented this attack wave by attempting to coerce clan militias to demobilize. Al Shabaab made an agreement on December 23 with a major subclan in northern Galgudud region to

keep their clan militia from fighting al Shabaab.¹³ The clan elders agreed to forgo cooperation with government forces and disarm in al Shabaab-controlled villages in exchange for the return of 67 prisoners and free commerce.¹⁴ Al Shabaab abducted at least 29 civilians in the Hiraan region between December 30 and January 2 and will likely attempt to use the hostages to coerce clan militia in Hiraan the same way it did in northern Galgudud.¹⁵ Disrupting Somali forces and demobilizing clan militias would prevent further offensives into al Shabaab havens in the Galgudud region and potentially set conditions for al Shabaab to reenter previously lost rural areas of central Somalia. Two al Shabaab factions from rival clans clashed in the Hiraan region over the kidnappings on January 9, indicating the kidnapping campaign may also backfire and inflame clan tensions within al Shabaab.¹⁶

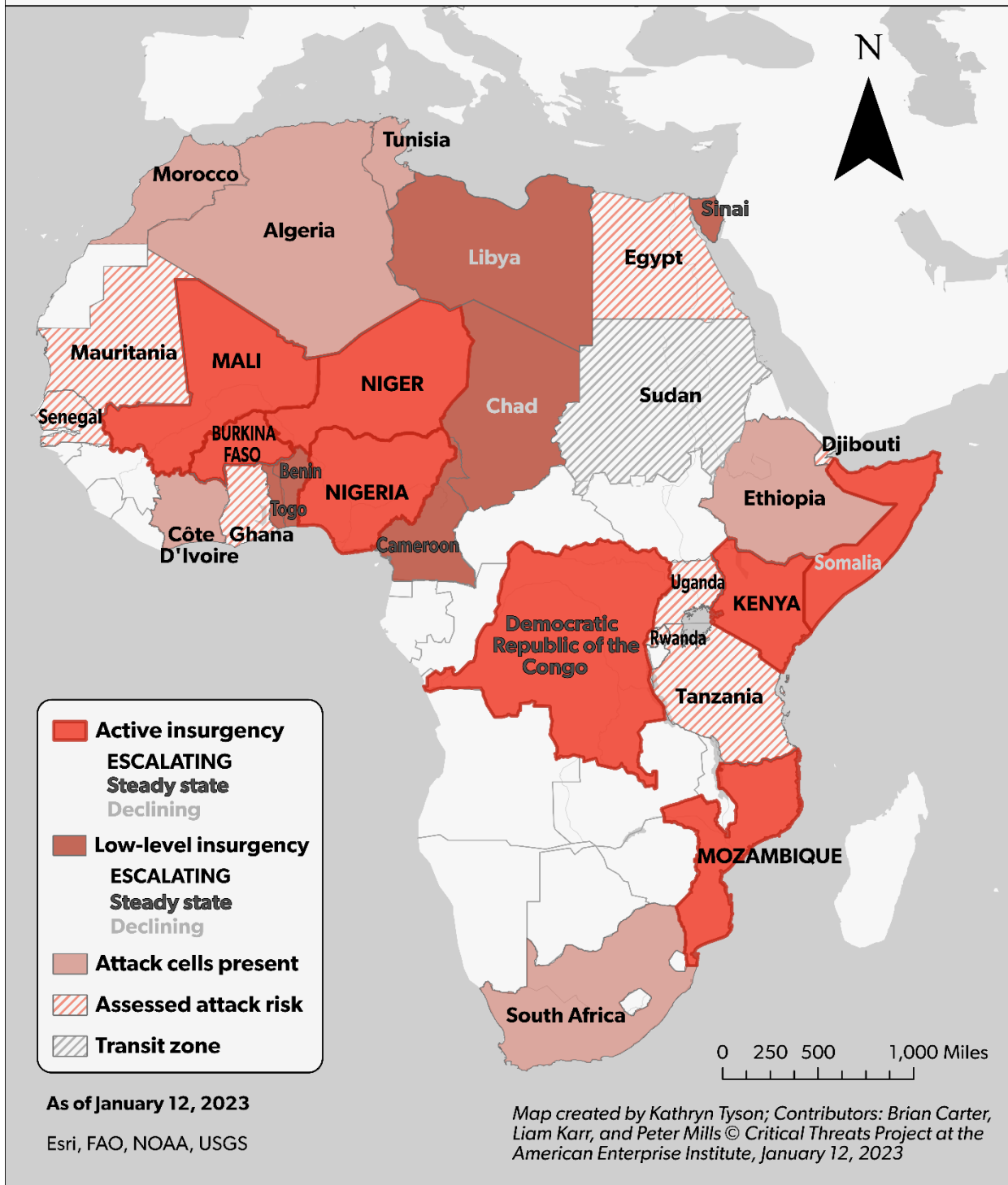
It is highly unlikely that al Shabaab leadership has reached out to the Somali Federal Government (SFG) for negotiations, despite its losses in central Somalia. The Somali deputy defense minister claimed that al Shabaab approached the SFG for potential talks during a January 7 press conference discussing military operations in central Somalia, leading several media outlets to circulate the claim.¹⁷ The SFG and al Shabaab quickly denied the reports.¹⁸ Al Shabaab has rejected outreach efforts from multiple Somali administrations since 2009 because it views the SFG as an illegitimate “apostate” government.¹⁹

The central Somalia offensive is more likely causing an increase in unofficial talks with mid- to low-level al Shabaab militants looking to defect. The nature of the offensive is likely compounding the psychological effect of battlefield setbacks among al Shabaab fighters. A March 2022 report from the George Washington University Program on Extremism noted that drone strikes and public uprisings are two key fears among al Shabaab militants. The central Somalia offensive uses both tools.²⁰ Two al Shabaab factions reportedly clashed in al Shabaab-controlled Mudug region on December 31, killing 12 militants, after one group attempted to defect.²¹ An increase in defections would indicate the offensive is causing more widespread unrest among al Shabaab’s ranks.

Figure 5. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Africa

As of January 2023



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Afghanistan-Pakistan. The TTP has escalated attacks since calling off a cease-fire with Pakistan in November 2022. The cease-fire had begun in June 2022 following negotiations.²² The cease-fire began to break down after several TTP commanders died under mysterious circumstances in Afghanistan.²³ TTP began claiming “defensive” attacks against Pakistan in September 2022 but did

not announce the end of the cease-fire until late November 2022.²⁴ The group has since escalated attacks across Pakistan.²⁵ These attacks include attempts to overrun security posts, including a multiday takeover of a detention center in December 2022.²⁶ The TTP has also increasingly targeted senior intelligence officials and expanded its area of operations since November, including its first attack in Islamabad in over a year.²⁷

Pakistan is considering a military campaign against the TTP, which may include cross-border strikes targeting TTP safe havens inside Afghanistan. The TTP uses support bases in Afghanistan to launch attacks into Pakistan. Senior Pakistani officials, including the prime minister and chief of army staff, attended key meetings in late December and early January on responding to the TTP threat, and the interior minister said explicitly that Pakistan had the right to respond in Afghanistan.²⁸ These statements imply Pakistan is preparing for an extended campaign against the TTP, but it has likely not yet decided how to address TTP safe havens in Afghanistan. The Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs said on December 29 that Pakistan is continuing to engage with the Afghan Taliban to resolve security issues.²⁹ The Pakistani interior minister said on January 4 that efforts were underway to bring TTP back to negotiations, which the Afghan Taliban would likely help facilitate.³⁰

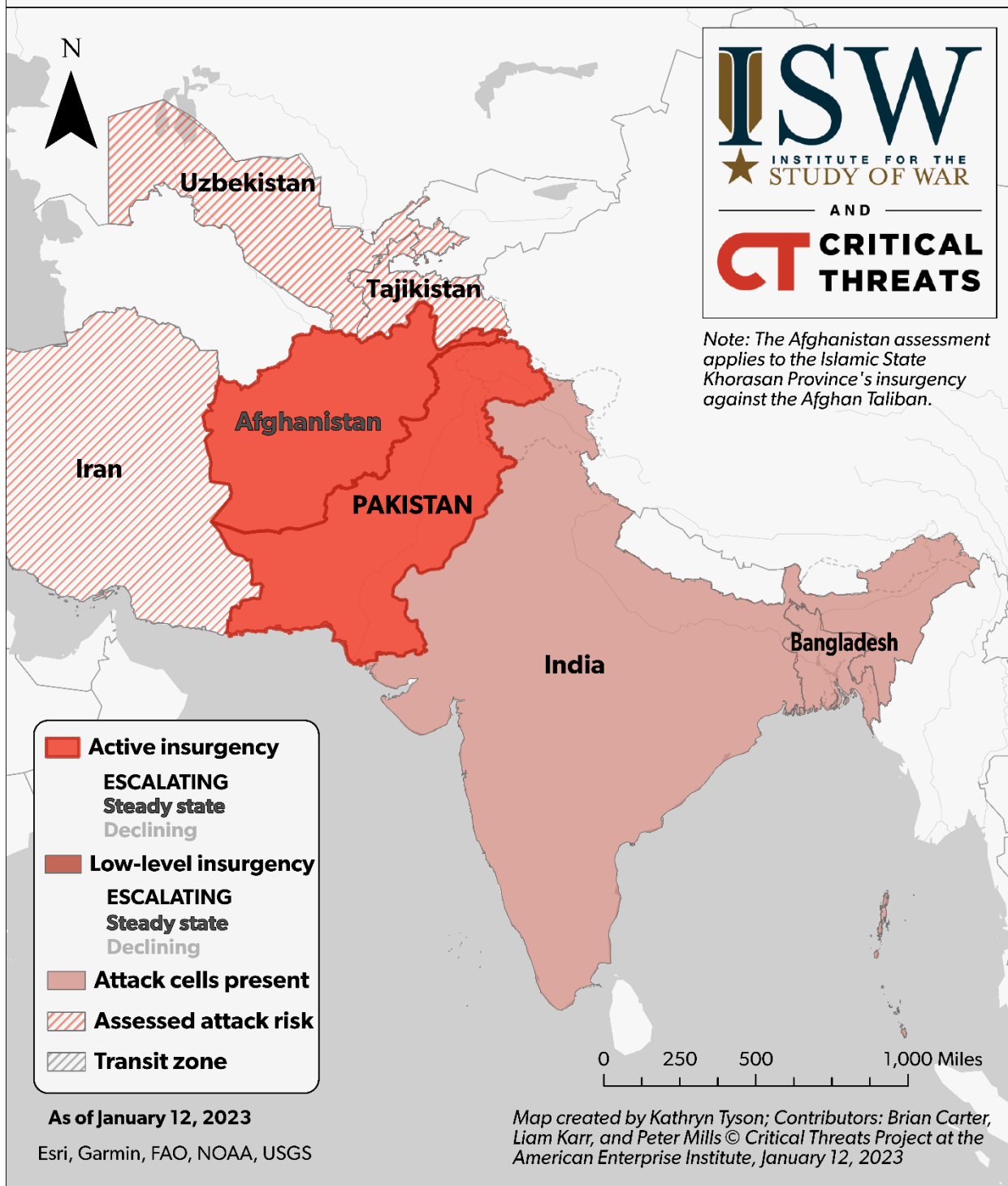
The relationship between the Afghan Taliban government and Pakistan has deteriorated over the past few months due to increasing border clashes and the Taliban government's failure to reign in TTP attacks targeting Pakistan. Taliban and Pakistani border forces clashed repeatedly in late 2022, typically over Pakistan's construction of checkpoints and fences along the border. The Taliban Ministry of Defense responded to Pakistan's threats, stating the Taliban would respond militarily against any Pakistani attack inside Afghanistan and deploying hundreds of fighters, including armored vehicles, to the border near Kandahar on January 1.³¹ The Taliban government softened its rhetoric a few days later, stating it sought good relations with Pakistan, but it still blamed Pakistan for the tensions. The Taliban government likely does not desire a wider military confrontation with Pakistan, despite hostile rhetoric. Afghanistan's economy has collapsed and remains unable to recover, rendering it vulnerable to any serious economic disruption that a wider conflict with Pakistan would bring.³²

The Taliban government will seek to avoid open military conflict with Pakistan but will remain either unable or unwilling to restrict TTP operations targeting Pakistan from Afghanistan. The TTP has sworn allegiance to the Afghan Taliban's supreme leader, and the organizations share ideological and personal ties.³³ The Afghan Taliban government, like past Afghan governments, does not recognize the legitimacy of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.³⁴ Many Afghan Taliban and TTP foot soldiers and mid-ranked commanders have a shared animosity toward the Pakistani state, making any Afghan Taliban operations against the TTP internally controversial. Pakistan will continue to face increasing public pressure to respond to the TTP's escalating campaign, likely leading to renewed strikes on TTP positions in Afghanistan that will contribute to worsening relations with the Afghan Taliban. Previous Pakistani airstrikes on TTP positions in Afghanistan in April 2022 did not alter Afghan Taliban government policy toward the TTP but did enflame anti-Pakistan sentiment in Afghanistan.³⁵

Figure 6. The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia

The Salafi-Jihadi Movement in Central and South Asia

As of January 2023



Source: Kathryn Tyson.

Other Updates:

Middle East

Yemen. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains an active insurgency in southern Yemen. The group conducted two bombings targeting the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a United Arab Emirates-backed southern Yemeni secessionist organization, in Abyan governorate in southern Yemen on January 7.³⁶ The AQAP bombings were likely a response to STC operations in Abyan, which targeted AQAP but also aimed to weaken the STC's rivals in southern Yemen.³⁷ Political rivalries in southern Yemen undermine counterterrorism efforts. For a detailed assessment of the STC, see Brian Carter's "Understanding Military Units in Southern Yemen."³⁸

Iraq. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) announced that it disrupted an ISIS double suicide attack in Erbil on January 9.³⁹ ISIS planned to target New Year's celebrations. The KRG prime minister said the attack cell consisted of four ISIS fighters, two of whom had previously been in al Hol internally displaced persons' camp in Syria.

Africa

Nigeria. The Boko Haram Bakura faction has launched an offensive against Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) in northeastern Nigeria, potentially posing the largest threat to ISWAP dominance in northeastern Nigeria since the death of late Boko Haram leader Abubakr Shekau in May 2021.⁴⁰ The Bakura faction is one of at least two Boko Haram splinters in northeastern Nigeria that did not join ISWAP after Shekau's death.⁴¹ Bakura faction militants have overrun several ISWAP camps in the Lake Chad marshes since December 31, which has reportedly forced ISWAP leaders to flee to the Sambisa Forest.⁴² ISWAP and the Bakura faction had not fought since the spring of 2022.⁴³ ISWAP is now regrouping to fend off the Bakura faction and another Boko Haram group it has been fighting in the Sambisa Forest throughout 2022.⁴⁴ The Bakura offensive will likely disrupt ISWAP's operations in northeastern Nigeria as the group focuses on regaining lost territory.

Burkina Faso. The Burkinabe junta is pushing France out of Burkina Faso while growing closer to Russia. Africa Intelligence reported that France will likely remove its special forces mission from Burkina Faso in February.⁴⁵ This move, if confirmed, follows months of worsening French-Burkinabe relations since Burkina Faso's September 2022 coup. This relationship reached a new low after the junta asked France to withdraw its ambassador in early January 2023.⁴⁶ Russia is poised to take France's spot as a security partner, as it has in Mali, where Wagner Group mercenaries are deployed.⁴⁷ Mali has facilitated talks between the Burkinabe junta and Russia, including a secret trip by the Burkinabe prime minister to Moscow in December 2022.⁴⁸ The Ghanaian president and a Russian military observer also alleged that Russian Wagner mercenaries were in Burkina Faso and finalizing a deal with the junta in late December 2022.⁴⁹ Wagner has failed to make up for the decreasing Western counterterrorism support in Mali and instead committed numerous human rights abuses that benefit Salafi-jihadi recruitment.⁵⁰

Central and South Asia

Afghanistan. Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) is likely exploiting Taliban infighting and disorganization to conduct attacks in high security areas in Kabul. An ISKP suicide bomber attacked the Taliban-run Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Kabul, killing and wounding several dozen Afghan diplomats, including one Taliban guard.⁵¹ Local analysts and journalists report Taliban diplomats were meeting with Chinese representatives at the time of the bombing.⁵² ISKP has previously attacked foreign diplomatic facilities in Kabul and is likely trying to undermine the Taliban government's ability to establish relations with neighboring countries. Further unverified rumors

report the Taliban Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Stanekzai may have been the suicide bomber's intended target.⁵³ Stanekzai is controversial within the Taliban movement for his speeches implicitly criticizing Taliban policies banning women's education. ISKP may be intending to exacerbate Taliban infighting and mistrust by attacking controversial Taliban leaders.

¹ Source available on request.

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³ <https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/node/5578467>; https://dierezzorenw.blogspot.com/2022/11/blog-post_21.html; and source available on request.

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