Challenges and opportunities for conflict resolution with Salafi jihadi armed groups

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What is the policy brief about?

This policy brief highlights recommendations for evidence-based policy making on pathways to conflict de-escalation with Salafi jihadi armed groups. It proposes a more nuanced public discussion of the topic. This brief draws mainly on the research report "Dialogue with Salafi jihadi armed groups: Challenges and opportunities for conflict de-escalation" which concludes a two-year research project based on case studies in Somalia, Syria and Mali.

Why is the topic relevant?

Armed groups are part of most civil war settlements and are widely seen as important stakeholders in reaching sustainable peace agreements. Yet the post-9/11 era, marked by the 'war on terror' and the fight against violent extremism, has raised a daunting question, which remains unanswered: how to achieve peace with Salafi jihadi armed groups (SJAGs)?

Attempts to defeat such insurgencies by military means have largely proved ineffective, and their impact has expanded well beyond the global south, notably through transnational refugee movements and 'home-grown' acts of 'terrorist' violence in Western societies. This has prompted many governments to explore alternative options to the 'war on terror'. However, the option of engaging SJAGs through soft-power dialogue or negotiation remains a taboo for most government actors, based on the assumption that their radical ideology and extreme behaviour preclude any negotiated conflict settlement. These allegations need to be tested empirically by investigating the hindrances, conditions and windows of opportunity for conflict de-escalation.

For whom is it important?

The policy brief is primarily addressed to policy-makers as well as journalists and other opinion makers at the national and international levels. It is also of interest to researchers and students interested in conflict transformation and negotiations with non-state armed actors.

Key recommendations

- Overturn policy myths and misconceptions about SJAGs – particularly on their perceived homogeneity and on dialogue prospects.
- Focus on reducing SJAGs' violent behaviour and inducing them to pursue their religious and political objectives non-violently through democratic politics, instead of challenging the legitimacy of their ideological narrative.
- Promote, rather than undermine, the space for social interaction and 'bridge-building' with SJAGs to foster their pragmatic moderation.
- Strengthen government capacity for service provision and responsiveness to the needs of their people to reduce the popular appeal of SJAGs.
- Create legal frameworks enabling dialogue efforts with SJAGs for the purpose of conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding.

Content

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1 Introduction

In some of the most intense ongoing armed conflicts (Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia and Nigeria, to name a few), violent state challengers are characterised by their radical religious beliefs rooted in Salafi-based Islamism. To better understand possible pathways to violence de-escalation or conflict transformation in such contexts, one needs to analyse the behavioural, ideological and organisational patterns of Salafi jihadi armed groups (SJAGs).

There are many recurrent assumptions around SJAGs, which dominate both policy and academic discourses, depicting them as transnational network-based entities that are detached from local societies, pursue irrational, non-negotiable goals, and employ extreme and egregious modes of action – openly committing atrocity crimes as a core part of their strategy. In the face of such insurgencies, governments and global counter-terrorist coalitions have prioritised violent counter-insurgency through military means, combined with measures to prevent violent extremism by seeking to reduce the appeal of SJAGs and undermine their recruitment strategies. Yet so far, these approaches have failed to end violence or to achieve a military defeat of these groups, prompting policy-makers and analysts to explore alternative strategies, including soft-power dialogue engagement such as peace negotiations. In light of this recent development, there is a need to interrogate past practices and future options for negotiated settlements with SJAGs. What do we know about the (de-)escalation trajectories of SJAGs? How do these compare with those of other non-state armed groups (NSAGs)? What role does dialogue engagement play in their behavioural dynamics? What are the specific challenges of dialogue and negotiation, and how might these be mitigated?

In order to address these questions, we embarked on a two-year research project, with funding from the German Foundation for Peace Research (DSF). We gathered and compared empirical evidence from three primary case studies in Syria (Ahrar al-Sham), Somalia (al-Shabaab) and Mali (Ansar Dine), and additional desk-based cases in Egypt, Algeria and Afghanistan. Our primary method of data collection consisted of 118 semi-structured interviews with local scholars, political or security analysts, mediation and humanitarian practitioners, individuals with close ties to the movements under study, and in one case an active member. In addition to fieldwork in the three primary case study contexts or neighbouring states (Turkey, Kenya, Mauritania), interviews were carried out in Europe and the USA with academic experts on conflict resolution and Islamist-based violence, as well as with representatives from mediation and humanitarian organisations with a track record of dialogue engagement with SJAGs. This brief synthesises the findings compiled in case study report and a more comprehensive research report (see below, References and further readings).

2 Findings

Internal dynamics and factors driving de-escalation

Due to their labelling as 'violent extremists', it is commonly assumed that SJAGs need to undergo ideological de-radicalisation as a precondition for violence mitigation or conflict resolution. Our research aimed to critically assess this claim by uncovering the causal mechanisms influencing the (de-)escalation patterns in conflicts involving SJAGs. For each group under study, we identified several 'critical junctures' or strategic shifts leading to major behavioural change, and analysed the intra-group and external factors influencing these trajectories. For example, in many instances SJAGs appeared to be **responsive to societal preferences** among populations under their control, which indicates that these groups do not operate in isolation from their local context, and these societal relationships can induce conflict de-escalation. Indeed, popular pressure from SJAGs' local constituencies or broader society was identified as a significant factor of change, especially in contexts where SJAGs conduct governance activities and exert territorial control. Social relations and responsiveness encourage pragmatic attitudes and behavioural choices – e.g. in the interpretation and application of Sharia law or in attitudes towards dialogue and negotiation – in order to garner or maintain popular support.

Concerning intra-group dynamics, we found that **power relations within the leadership** influence behavioural change as well. However, it remains unclear whether de-escalation is more likely under a strong and united leadership, or in situations of power struggle between militarists/ideologues and pragmatists. With regard to ideological factors, across our sample of primary and secondary cases, we found no instances of decisive de-radicalisation in these groups' overarching beliefs. Indeed, no major change was observed in their core goals to build an Islamic state based on the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Instead, the most notable shift seems to occur in the **de-legitimation of violent means** to pursue the group's ideological project, prompted by leaders' re-assessments of the means and ends of jihad in light of an evolving external environment.

SJAGs: a distinct sub-type of non-state armed groups?

The research report highlights that SJAGs cannot be treated as a cohesive, homogeneous category of actors, and in fact, we identified more differences between the groups under study than between them and other (e.g. secular) NSAGs. Consequently, we found no evidence to support policy discourses that 'exceptionalise' armed groups affiliated or sympathetic to IS or al-Qaeda franchises, or that treat them as uniform entities. These hypotheses do not seem to match reality. The groups under study were found to share many features with other armed opposition groups around the world in terms of their seemingly uncompromising and dogmatic ideologies or their transnational elements – including foreign patrons and foreign fighters.

One substantial difference between SJAGs and other NSAGs may be the level of **social pressure that they face within the international Salafi jihadi scene,** which seriously impedes their opportunities to articulate and promote a shift towards peaceful settlement without losing credibility among their peers and competitors. Narratives such as the 'slippery slope' warn against political engagement, perceiving it to lead inevitably to a divergence from the 'true' path. SJAGs thus remain highly dependent upon the approval of their peers and the religious rulings of external figures. Inter-group competition and social control can strengthen dogmatic voices and promote the continuation of violence to retain relevance, credibility, funding and attraction for fighters. In fact, SJAGs have to administer to a double – and not necessarily overlapping – set of constituencies: their (national and internationalised) Salafi jihadi supporters and the local people who support them for political reasons (e.g. their nationalist agenda) or

socio-economic reasons (i.e. their mobilisation against marginalisation). If these constituents' demands are at cross-purposes, it can affect the dynamics within the group. Accordingly, SJAGs might be more prone than other NSAGs to face internal splits if there is direct competition from a more radical Islamist rival or if the interests of their constituencies collide.

Taking stock of past experiences with third-party dialogue engagement

In spite of the policy imperative 'we will not talk to terrorists with blood on their hands' heard from local government representatives and foreign diplomats alike, our research documented multiple instances of dialogue and negotiation involving SJAGs for a wide range of humanitarian, security/strategic or political purposes.

Across all case studies, **humanitarian actors were at the frontline of engagement** with SJAGs, their aim being to negotiate access and assistance to war-affected populations, prisoner exchange schemes or local ceasefire deals. Dialogue attempts also served the function of **information gathering**, for instance for intelligence purposes or to understand what drives these insurgency groups and their members, and what factors might be conductive to de-escalation. In Somalia, engagement also took the form of targeted **defection schemes** to incentivise individual disengagement from al-Shabaab; however, these programmes have increased scepticism and suspicion among the group's leadership towards any kind of dialogue attempts by outsiders. **Religious encounters** that seek to engage on and question SJAGs' interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence and ideology have not proven effective so far either. As reported by interviewees, the groups' limited religious literacy and their lack of experienced scholars made in-depth religious discussions generally difficult. Conflict resolution INGOs and **professional mediators** also sought out dialogue engagement with SJAGs to explore the feasibility of negotiations, often mandated by European or North American governments who were interested in exploring soft-power options while avoiding being seen talking with publicly shunned SJAGs. Tentative efforts to reach out to these groups through discreet dialogue channels in Somalia and Mali ultimately failed, either because the groups pulled out of the conversation or because international actors engaged in counter-insurgency operations discredited these efforts.

The entry points for these engagements were predominantly bottom-up, through SJAGs' constant interactions with the population in the context of their 'rebel governance' activities and through intermediation by local bridge-builders. Accordingly, a common trait across all case studies was the key role of community-based individuals relying on their expertise, trust, personality, kinship or personal history to initiate communication channels. Examples of such **societal bridge-builders** included tribal, traditional or religious figures, business professionals, local NGOs, or relatives of SJAG members. Tribes and clans can function as a cross-cutting identity marker and thus foster forms of cooperation between combatants and the wider society. At the other end of the spectrum, we also came across a few examples of **formal negotiations initiated from the top**, including (aborted) peace talks between Ansar Dine leaders and Malian government delegates in Ouagadougou (2012), and several instances of participation by Ahrar al-Sham in international negotiations over the future of Syria, notably in Riyadh (2015) and Astana (2017). This latter group even had a functioning political office in Turkey that provided official diplomatic access to the outside world.

Key challenges to negotiations and impact of engagement on de-escalation pathways

There are significant challenges for dialogue engagement for purposes of peace negotiations with SJAGs, starting with the ideological features of these groups. SJAGs need to **formulate concrete and negotiable political aims** and show their readiness to abide by international human rights standards, which can be antithetical to the model of state and society promoted by such actors in terms of individual freedoms and especially the rights of women and minorities. On the other side, many challenges arise for the governments concerned, especially when the **states opposed by SJAGs lack a cohesive approach** to conflict mitigation and appear to have weak social or political legitimacy. Furthermore, **governments tend to frame SJAGs as terrorists**, which underplays the political nature and home-grown roots of these insurgencies, deters the search for political solutions, and intensifies polarisation and binary 'with us or against us' narratives. In turn, these dynamics reinforce the lack of appetite for dialogue engagement among state actors, who risk facing public backlash once they decide to open a negotiation track. A similar logic applies to international actors faced with the challenge of justifying engagement with SJAGs – seen as the enemies of Western civilisation – to their own publics. Unfavourable conditions within and outside the group thus hinder dialogue engagement by/with SJAGs.

What, then, is the overall role of soft-power third-party engagement in promoting these groups' interest in dialogue and, down the line, in a negotiated conflict settlement? We argue that the recognition by SJAGs of political negotiations as the primary strategic option should not be treated as a precondition for engagement, since **dialogue engagement itself may help to pull SJAGs into the logic of negotiations**, or, in other words, to enhance their 'negotiability' (Lustenberger 2012). Our research findings indicated that interactions with societal bridge-builders and other external voices can support internal dialogue within these groups, which may in turn affect the organisational balance between pragmatic and hardliner factions. Individual or collective engagement can also promote the politicisation of SJAGs, understood as their increased political capacity and experience, the clarification of their political objectives, and their growing interest in exploring options to pursue their goals politically and peacefully in a democratic environment. Dialogue may also lead to ideological reconsiderations – as illustrated by the de-radicalisation of the group Gama'a al-Islamiya in Egypt in the early 2000s, which demonstrates that interactions with civil society activists can prompt SJAGs to review and revise their objectives and ideological underpinnings. However, untimely negotiations or ill-conceived dialogue attempts with their individual members can backfire on the organisational cohesion of the group and ultimately lead to more uncompromising attitudes. Dialogue engagements with SJAGs should therefore carefully avoid promoting a splintering by hardliner factions, which would lead to escalatory dynamics rather than the intended de-escalation.

Future prospects for conflict de-escalation

Our research identified two main plausible de-escalation scenarios for SJAGs based on interviews across the three case studies: comprehensive incapacitation and adaptation through negotiation. **Incapacitation** refers to SJAGs' demilitarisation and demobilisation caused by a lack of capacity rather than a shift in ideological conviction. In Syria, Ahrar al-Sham became essentially incapacitated after February 2019, although this pathway was mainly pushed through by rebel competition, not by state repression – the group was outflanked by a more radical Salafi jihadi competitor. In Mali and Somalia, by contrast, there is considerable scepticism regarding the combined capacity of government forces and international allies to destroy SJAGs militarily. Comprehensive incapacitation therefore also encompasses constructive efforts to render these groups irrelevant: by addressing the root causes of the conflict through good governance, service delivery and other measures to address the basic grievances of the population in deprived areas where SJAGs flourish, governments may cause them to lose the bases from which they mobilise and recruit members and supporters. This long-term strategy requires sufficient capacity on the part of state institutions to significantly change socio-economic conditions on the ground.

On the other hand, **adaptation** refers to a group's strategic decision to give up violent tactics, while keeping its ideology intact and retaining organisational capacity to conduct armed operations. Many interviewees gave strong credence to this scenario for the cases of Somalia and Mali, while some went further by expressing their preference for formal negotiations through a peace process in the hope that the groups would eventually dismantle their armed wing and enter some form of power-sharing agreement. The necessity of political negotiations is increasingly voiced openly in both countries. Yet, as we have pointed out above, the perceived 'exceptionalism' of SJAGs has so far remained a barrier to initiating concrete steps towards engagement, and there is no consensus on the conflicts' 'ripeness' for a negotiated solution. As was pointed out by interviewees, including a former member of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, the prospects for a political agreement with the Taliban in Afghanistan could provide a breakthrough for other conflicts involving SJAGs. Despite the many challenges that negotiations would entail, the budding Afghan peace process shows that negotiations with Islamist armed groups are not insurmountable if the right internal factors and a conducive environment are in place.

3 Key recommendations

In conclusion, and based on our research findings, we offer the following concrete recommendations to actors involved in conflicts with SJAGs – including national governments, international policymakers, and mediation professionals – in order to enhance the prospect of peaceful political settlement.

Promoting the factors of ideological and behavioural de-escalation:

≡ *Focus on reducing SJAGs' violent behaviour and inducing them to pursue their religious and political objectives non-violently through democratic politics, instead of challenging the legitimacy of their ideological narrative*: Based on our findings on the factors influencing the de-escalation pathways of SJAGs, the role of ideology often tends to be over-emphasised by media and policy discourses. Rather than focusing on the de-radicalisation of 'violent extremists', government actors should seek to strengthen the inclusiveness of the political system in order to create incentives for peaceful participation and hence induce or support the gradual politicisation of SJAGs.

≡ *Promote, rather than undermine, the space for societal bridge-building*: civil society connectors with access to SJAGs – such as religious, business or social leaders – are often targets of military operations due to their alleged proximity to violent extremists. This is counter-productive as it increases local resistance to (governmental or foreign) military interventions, and reduces the space for social interaction. Instead, government actors should protect and enhance the space and capacity for civil society actors to engage with, and influence, SJAGs, since our findings suggest that these groups are more responsive to public preferences than is often credited, and that increased interactions with society can foster their pragmatic moderation.

Fostering an enabling environment for dialogue:

≡ *Strengthen government capacity for service provision and responsiveness to the needs of their people.* The socio-political agenda articulated by SJAGs often rests on claims of state inefficiency and/or illegitimacy which resonate with marginalised segments of the population. Strengthening access to basic services, a fair and efficient justice system, or adherence to principles of good governance can reduce these groups' popular appeal.

≡ *Create legal frameworks enabling dialogue efforts with SJAGs for the purpose of conflict de-escalation and peacebuilding.* Where governments are unwilling or unable to explore, attempt or pursue dialogue engagement with SJAGs by themselves, (I)NGOs need a safe space to conduct exploratory talks with these groups. Hence it is crucial to refine international and national anti-terror laws to de-criminalise dialogue engagement with proscribed actors for peacebuilding ends.

≡ *Overturn policy myths and misconceptions about SJAGs – particularly on their perceived homogeneity and on dialogue prospects.* Given the huge diversity of actors commonly labelled as Salafi jihadi armed groups, and the various common traits which they share with secular armed groups, media and policy discourses should avoid using over-simplifying language which exceptionalises these groups or ignores local realities and context specificities. While peace negotiation is not a panacea, it should also not be excluded a priori based on the assumed features of SJAGs. In fact, many instances of dialogue encounters have occurred in the past, even though most have failed to develop into sustained negotiations so far. Furthermore, exploratory surveys indicate that Western public opinion might be less opposed to dialogue with SJAGs than is often assumed (Conciliation Resources 2017); this topic merits further investigation and research investment, as it might convince the respective governments that exploring pathways to dialogue might not only be a cost-efficient but also a socially legitimate option.

Preparing for negotiations:

≡ *Be wary of the global Salafi-jihadi scene and adopt a Do-No-Harm approach while exploring entry points for dialogue.* When designing strategies for engagement through the splintering of a group or isolating its hardliners, third-party actors should have in-depth knowledge on the internal power dynamics at play, otherwise such attempts can backfire by inciting violent escalation or fostering mistrust among the leadership. Between bottom-up and top-down strategies, a 'middle-out' strategy focusing on key actors who can both influence moderate and hardliner factions might mitigate the risk of inadvertent straining of group cohesion.

≡ *During dialogue engagement with SJAGs, consider early on the potential impact of the group's demands on society's most vulnerable groups.* When dialogue enters a more formalised stage, it becomes imperative to protect the rights of minorities and women – who are often undermined by Salafi ideology – and to ensure that the peace process is inclusive, by granting a meaningful voice to socially marginalised groups.

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