

Dialogue with Salafi jihadi armed groups:

Challenges and opportunities for conflict
de-escalation

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with support from Marie Migeon

Research Report

About this report

This report was written in the context of the research project “Salafi-Jihadi Armed Groups – (De-)escalation Trajectories and Dialogue Options” conducted by the Berghof Foundation from November 2017 to December 2019. Case study research was carried out on Salafi-jihadi armed groups (SJAGs) in Mali, Somalia and Syria.

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Abbreviations

AMISOM	African Union Mission to Somalia
AQ	al-Qaeda
AQIM	al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
FIS/AIS	<i>Front Islamique du Salut/Armée Islamique du Salut</i> (Islamic Salvation Front/Islamic Salvation Army, Algeria)
GI	<i>Gama'a al Islamiya</i> (Islamic Group, Egypt)
GIA	<i>Groupe Islamique Armé</i> (Armed Islamic Group, Algeria)
GSPC	<i>Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat</i> (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, Mali/Sahel)
IHL	International humanitarian law
ISIS/ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
LIFG	<i>Al-Jama'a al-Islamiyyah al-Muqatilah bi-Libya</i> (Libyan Islamic Fighting Group)
MNLA	<i>Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l'Azawad</i> (National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, Mali)
MUJAO	<i>Mouvement pour l'unicité et le jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest</i> (Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa)
NSAG	Non-state armed group
SJAG	Salafi jihadi armed group

Executive summary

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? The purpose of this study is to advance knowledge on these questions.

The primary method of data collection consisted of 118 semi-structured interviews on three case studies in Syria (Ahrar al-Sham), Somalia (al-Shabaab) and Mali (Ansar Dine) with local scholars, political or security analysts, mediation and humanitarian practitioners, individuals with close ties to the movements in question, and in one case an active member. In addition to fieldwork in the three 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.

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 of these actors. 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 develop or maintain popular support.

In terms of intra-group dynamics, we found that power relations within the leadership – e.g. between hardliners and moderates – influence behavioural change as well. Based on our three primary case studies

and desk studies on former SJAGs in Egypt, Algeria and Libya, however, it remains unclear whether de-escalation is more likely under a strong and united leadership, or in situations of power struggle between militarists or ideologues and pragmatists. With regard to ideological factors, across our sample of primary and secondary cases, the most notable shift seems to occur in the de-legitimation of violent means to pursue the group's ideological project, while we found no instances of de-radicalisation in relation to groups' overarching purpose or core beliefs. Indeed, no major change was observed in their core goals to build an Islamic state based on the Salafi interpretation of Islam. It might thus be deduced from these past trajectories that instead of challenging the legitimacy of their ideological narrative, third- parties might more effectively focus on reducing SJAGs' violent behaviour and inducing them to pursue their religious and political objectives non-violently through democratic politics.

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

This report also 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 which treat them as uniform entities, as 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 uncompromising, dogmatic and seemingly irrational 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 which 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 (e.g. nationalist) or socio-economic (i.e. marginalisation) reasons. 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 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 conducive 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 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). The latter SJAG even had a functioning political office in Turkey that provided official diplomatic access to the group by 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 of the conflict spectrum, many challenges arise for the governments concerned, especially when the states opposed by SJAGs suffer from a lack of cohesion – both generally and in their approach to conflict mitigation – and 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 deradicalisation 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**

The report identifies 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 on 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.

1 Introduction

Armed groups are part of most civil war settlements and are widely seen as important players 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). Based on three case studies in Mali, Somalia and Syria, this research report presents empirical insights on the behavioural, organisational and ideological dynamics of SJAGs, and on the challenges and opportunities of third-party dialogue engagement with such actors in order to reduce violence or pave the way for a negotiated settlement. This introductory section delves into the rationale, objectives and methodology of the research project underpinning this report.

1.1 Research rationale and objectives

In 2017, 48 countries were affected by an internal violent conflict between state authorities and one or several non-state armed groups (NSAGs) (Pettersson and Eck 2018). In some of the most intense ongoing conflicts (from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan, Somalia and Nigeria), these NSAGs are characterised by their radical religious beliefs rooted in Salafi-based Islamism and the brutality of their modes of action – openly committing atrocity crimes as a core part of their strategy. In 2015, the Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda and their affiliates represented 25 out of 45 NSAGs active in state-based armed conflicts, and accounted for more than half of all deaths caused by organised violence (66,000 out of 118,000) (Melander, Pettersson and Themnér 2016).

Attempts to defeat such insurgencies by military means have largely proved ineffective so far, inducing Western governments – prompted by the realisation that these conflicts are increasingly reaching their doorstep in the form of refugee influx and ‘home-grown’ acts of terrorist violence – to explore alternative options to the ‘war on terror’. This context led to the emergence of policies and programmes to prevent or counter violent extremism (PVE/CVE), which aim either to tackle the root causes of violent extremism by addressing the ‘push and pull factors’ that draw individuals and their communities on the path to radicalisation, or to ‘rehabilitate’ individual defectors or imprisoned ex-combatants (Bowen 2017, Desta 2016, Holmer 2013, Köhler 2016, Neumann 2010, UNDP 2017). However, there are no existing policy approaches for ‘engaging violent extremists’ (or ‘EVE’) – i.e. groups that are already/still radicalised – through dialogue or negotiation.

Against this background, this project sought to contribute to the exploration of policy options for soft-power third-party engagement with radical Islamist armed groups, while simultaneously filling a conceptual and empirical blind spot. Indeed, while there is a vast body of literature on the transformation of NSAGs into peaceful political actors, especially through negotiated settlements, very little comparative research has yet been undertaken on the de-escalatory trajectories of SJAGs, either on the basis of (arguably limited) past cases or by predicting future trends, options and opportunities in this area. As argued by an expert on radical Islam, “*the CVE industry has introduced an unhelpful terminology which exceptionalises these groups and treats them as ‘extra-terrestrial’*”. As a consequence, the phenomenon of Salafi jihadi violence becomes “*de-historicised*”, and prevents critical thinking and comparative analysis (interview with Professor Mahmoud Mohamedou, author of “A Theory of ISIS”, November 2018). Moreover, policy discourses on violent extremism tend to focus primarily on its ideological or religious dimension. For instance, the Extremism Monitor (2018) led by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair (which lists 121 active

extremist Islamist groups in 2017, 92 of which use violence) states that “extremism based on a perversion of the religion of Islam – the turning of religious belief into a totalitarian political ideology – remains the most potent global security threat”.

The starting point for this research was hence the realisation that mainstream policy assumptions about contemporary SJAGs need to be put to the test by investigating their internal dynamics and the factors that have led, or may lead, to conflict de-escalation, including through dialogue engagement with their leaders/members. On the one hand, we aimed to identify trends and causalities in their behavioural, ideological and organisational evolution – in order to question the assumption underpinning de-radicalisation programmes that ideological moderation is a necessary precondition for behavioural de-escalation. On the other hand, one often comes across principled objections by various diplomats and politicians against talking to ‘terrorists with blood on their hands’ prior to their discursive moderation and disengagement from violence. One might ask, however, under which circumstances soft-power dialogue engagement might be used as an instrument to encourage such de-escalation in the first place. This research thus aimed to contribute to filling these knowledge gaps by addressing four main questions:

- ≡ *What are the (de-)escalation pathways of SJAGs?*
- ≡ *What is the existing experience with (or possible entry points for) third-party dialogue engagement with SJAGs?*
- ≡ *What is the role of third-party engagement in SJAGs’ de-escalation pathways?*
- ≡ *How do SJAGs compare with other types of NSAGs?*

1.2. Methodology

≡ **Definition of Salafi jihadi armed groups**

For the purpose of this project, we followed conventional definitions of NSAGs, understood as “any organized group with a basic structure of command operating outside state control that uses force to achieve its political or allegedly political objectives” (DCAF and Geneva Call 2011). This report is concerned with a sub-type of NSAGs that employ violent strategies in the pursuit of an Islamist ideology. Given the acute sensitivity and various misconceptions surrounding Islamist violent activism in its many forms, we consulted the relevant literature and sought expert advice from members of the project’s advisory board before settling for ‘Salafi jihadi armed groups’ as the label best designating our objects of study. The primary reason behind this terminological choice was its relative value neutrality (in comparison with ‘violent extremist’ or ‘radical Islamist’ organisations, for example) since ‘Salafism’ and ‘jihad’ are terms which these actors themselves use to self-describe; but also its reference to the particular Salafi ideological interpretations of Sunni Islam, which distinguishes SJAGs from other Islamist armed groups such as Hezbollah or Hamas. “In contrast with non-Salafi Islamist groups fighting against foreign occupation or domestic autocratic regimes, the objectives of Salafi jihadi groups are first and foremost the application of Islamic Law where they are located” (Drevon 2016, 16). Moreover, the term ‘Islamism’ is often associated with jihadism. A widely used typology of Salafis by Quintain Wiktorowicz (2006) divides them into three broad categories: purist, politico and jihadist. While the latter two categories both focus on the political sphere, the jihadists interpret the context as requiring violence and revolution to achieve change. According to Ashour (2015, 174), “Jihadism is a modern Islamist ideology which believes that armed confrontation with political rivals is a theologically legitimate, instrumentally efficient method for socio-political change. Depending on the type of jihadists, fighting (qital) can be one legitimate means for change among others, the only legitimate means for change, or an end per se. Jihadism, as a modern Islamist ideology, should not

be confused with jihad, an Islamic concept/duty that refers to various types of peaceful striving (struggling against sinful desires, Satan, or disease) and violent struggle (fighting against invaders or ‘infidels’).” Given the fact that the religious concept of jihad does not necessarily embrace violence, the qualifier ‘armed’ was added to limit the field of analysis to groups that have a military structure and use violent means. Still, it is worth highlighting that such categories are not clear-cut and do not have well-defined boundaries, as the groups under study do not always uphold a clear and coherent ideology, as will be shown in more detail in Section 2. For example, not all NSAGs referenced in this report are to be strictly defined as Salafist (e.g. Gama’a al-Islamiya in Egypt or Hizb-e Islami in Afghanistan), and even within a single organisation, not all factions could be labelled as jihadis (e.g. Ahrar al-Sham in Syria).

One of the starting points behind this research endeavour was the realisation that since the emergence of Islamist armed groups on the global stage, a number of experts on armed conflicts, political violence and atrocity crimes have taken stock of this new phenomenon by classifying such actors as ‘atypical’ NSAGs. For instance, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program updated its database in 2016 by adding a new category of armed violence specifically caused by groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and their affiliates. Various typologies categorise SJAGs according to their specific features, such as their internationalist goals and transnational nature or their rejection of the Western (Westphalian) model of statehood (Hegghammer 2014, Maher 2016, Piazza 2009, Zohar 2016). Bellamy (2016) also offers a systematic comparison of ‘traditional’ armed groups and ‘violent extremist’ organisations – while recognising that most NSAGs inhabit a position somewhere between these extremes. While this research project also stemmed from the assumption that armed groups affiliated to al-Qaeda and ISIS represent a distinct type of NSAGs, we were interested in understanding the variations within this sub-group, as well as similarities with other NSAGs. We therefore sought to investigate these assumed boundaries, postulating that the distinction between the ideological, behavioural and organisational features of armed actors would help us deepen as well as deconstruct many common assumptions surrounding SJAGs.

☰ Case study selection

This report will primarily rely on empirical evidence from three contemporary SJAGs in Somalia (al-Shabaab), Syria (Ahrar al-Sham) and Mali (Ansar Dine), based on the project’s case study reports (Göldner-Ebenthal 2019, Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019, Roetman, Migeon and Dudouet 2019, Bouhlel 2020).

The choice of case studies was motivated by analytical, pragmatic and strategic factors. Our analytical justification for the choice of cases was inspired by a ‘most similar’ comparative design (Yin 2014). On the one hand, all three selected armed actors are rooted in Salafist traditions of Sunni Islamism, and are affiliated (formally or informally) with the al-Qaeda ‘brand’. However, they display large variations with regard to the variables we aim to study, especially their (de-)escalatory pathways and track record of engagement in dialogue and negotiations. These distinctions are useful for a nuanced analysis of SJAGs, while the commonalities are also helpful in identifying specific insights on the distinctiveness of this type of armed actors.

The cases were also selected based on pragmatic and practical considerations, such as the researchers’ access to the field and ongoing operational work. Indeed, the Berghof Foundation has a proven track record of research and/or practical work in all three countries, which is a major advantage, considering the sensitivity of the subject of the research and the difficult access to data. In the case of Mali, due to the deterioration of the security situation throughout the research phase, part of the research was conducted by a consultant with a wide network of trusted contacts. Strategically, we also intentionally selected cases of SJAGs which are still active and where the conflict is still ongoing, hoping that the research findings will contribute to identifying prospective options for engagement and de-escalation and thus support conflict resolution efforts on the ground.

Al-Shabaab in Somalia

Established in 2006, al-Shabaab is a Salafi jihadi armed group that strives to take control of power in Somalia in order to establish a state and society based on a rigid interpretation of Sharia law. From the outset, al-Shabaab successfully framed its goal as national defence of Somalia from the interventionism by Christian foreign forces (especially Ethiopia but also international forces led by the African Union). In that sense, it was fighting a “defensive jihad” (Hansen 2013, 140) for Somalia’s right of self-determination, and controlled large swathes of land during 2009-2011. In addition to its proclaimed goals inside Somalia, al-Shabaab has increasingly adopted an internationalist language, seeking to frame the Somali struggle as part of a global jihadi movement.

Al-Shabaab’s originally high level of popular support began to wane over time due to the very large number of (Muslim) civilians affected by its violent attacks and draconic style of government in the areas under its control. The combined forces of the Somali Federal Government and the African Union (AMISOM) have failed to contain al-Shabaab so far. Indeed, al-Shabaab has lost significant amounts of territory since 2011 but has maintained its core fighting force by trading territory for time. It has launched international attacks, including in Kenya and Uganda, and threatened the US even though its main operational focus remains Somalia. In 2012, it swore allegiance to al-Qaeda (AQ), and began training recruits to embrace its message, hosting al-Qaeda members and exporting jihadists to other countries such as Kenya and Nigeria. It is listed internationally as a terrorist organisation.

The details of its organisational structure and power distribution are not entirely clear. Still, al-Shabaab has a strong central leadership, headed by the Emir with the support of a Shura Council, that rules through a ruthless internal secret police, the Amniyat, whose suppression of internal dissent has helped to maintain a certain degree of organisational unity.

Ahrar al-Sham in Syria

Ahrar al-Sham was founded in the early stages of the Syrian uprising in 2011, and seeks to establish a Sunni Islamic state in Syria. The organisation rose in importance due largely to its many and fortuitous alliances. Ahrar al-Sham cooperated with the al-Nusra Front and founded (among others) the Syrian Islamic Front, and “by summer 2013 it was present wherever Syrian rebels were fighting” (Steinberg 2016, 2). It remained one of the most powerful armed actors in Syria until the Syrian regime, with international support, started to regain territorial control. In recent years, Ahrar al-Sham has lost power and significance as the more radical successor organisation to al-Nusra, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), competed for supremacy.

Until its incapacitation in early 2019, Ahrar al-Sham had a clear leadership and command and control structure, divided into a military and a political branch. Ahrar al-Sham claimed no links with al-Qaeda although some of its founding members had close ties to – and previously fought for – AQ. It emphasised that its campaign was limited to Syria and that it was not pursuing global jihad. It began to rebrand itself as a moderate group in 2015 to distance itself from IS’s brutality, including through op-eds in the *Washington Post* and *Daily Telegraph*, in an attempt to convince the United States that it offered a better option for post-war Syria than IS or the Assad regime. Ahrar al-Sham was never designated a terrorist organisation.

Ansar Dine in Mali

Ansar Dine first became active in early 2012 as an ally of the *Mouvement National pour la Liberation de l’Azawad* (MNLA), a secular Tuareg NSAG that fought for an independent Azawad in northern Mali. Ansar Dine is an affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), which fights for an Islamist Sharia-ruled Malian state. Even though Ansar Dine’s leadership is still mainly Tuareg (most prominently its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly), it does not aim to establish an autonomous Islamist Tuareg state. In summer 2012, Ansar Dine turned on its secular ally MNLA and eventually took control of major cities in northern Mali with support from AQIM. Its leaders briefly participated in negotiations in Burkina Faso in late 2012 in an attempt to unite the multiple opposition groups (Lounnas 2014). Internal dissent on the overall strategy led to the formation and partition of a moderate splinter group. A French military intervention quickly managed to

push back the Islamists' hold on northern Mali, and Ansar Dine withdrew into the Sahel region in the very north of Mali. It has since been combining guerrilla and terrorist tactics in its fight against French, Malian and international (ECOWAS and UN) troops, and has claimed responsibility for major attacks in various parts of the territory.

Ansar Dine is led by one central figure who pursues a personality-driven style of leadership. Through its leader, it is well connected to various levels of Malian society (Walther and Christopolous 2015). In March 2017, Ansar Dine and three other SJAGs (Katiba Macina, Ansaroul Islam and AQIM) created an alliance, *Jamā'at nusrat al-islām wal-muslimīn* (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims – JNIM), which has led to a scale-up of attacks in Mali and in neighbouring Burkina Faso.

☰ Data collection

The primary method of data collection consisted of 118 semi-structured (on-site and virtual) interviews, most of which were conducted with selected interlocutors in Mali, Syria and Somalia, and their neighbouring countries of Mauritania, Turkey and Kenya respectively. These interlocutors included local scholars, counter-terrorism or CVE experts, mediation and humanitarian practitioners, individuals with close ties to the movements in question (influencers, sympathisers, proxies or former members), and in one case an active member. Additional interviews were carried out in Geneva, New York, Washington, London, Paris, Oslo and Berlin with experts on conflict resolution and Islamist-based violence, as well as with headquarter staff of mediation and humanitarian organisations with a track record of engagement with SJAGs, including the three groups under study. The research also relied on extensive analysis of the existing literature on the three case studies, and on primary sources such as propaganda videos and published interviews with their leaders, defectors, etc.

Finally, in order to enrich the findings from the three case studies, this study also draws on secondary sources available on additional cases of Islamist armed actors which have undergone large-scale, comprehensive de-escalation, i.e. complete cessation of violence and demilitarisation/demobilisation. They include Gama'a al-Islamiya in Egypt (GI), the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG) in Libya, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) in Algeria, and Hezb-e Islami in Afghanistan. With regard to the latter, we relied primarily on findings from a recent report published by the Berghof Foundation on the peace process with Hezb-e Islami, based on extensive interviews with its leadership (Rahim 2018).

The data analysis methods will be presented in detail in the following sections, including the study of critical junctures to analyse past trajectories and strategic shifts, and the use of scenario-building to identify plausible future developments and options for de-escalation. Our analysis was peer-reviewed by an advisory board composed of country and thematic experts, which met twice during the project, and whose members generously reviewed our methodology, findings and draft reports throughout the project.

The report is structured around the main research questions listed above and starts with an analysis of the (de-)escalation pathways of the researched SJAGs (Section 2), followed by a mapping of past experiences with third-party dialogue engagement with SJAGs, analysing the conditions and entry points for such dialogue (Section 3). Section 4 brings these two topics together, exploring how NSAGs' features might impede dialogue engagement and, in turn, how third-party engagement affects SJAGs' de-escalation pathways. Section 5 questions how the patterns observed across several SJAGs compare with existing knowledge on other types of NSAGs. Finally, based on the main research findings, Section 6 offers some predictive outlooks on potential future de-escalation pathways.

2 The de-escalation pathways of Salafi jihadi armed groups

2.1 Conceptual framework and methodology

In the conflict resolution field, scholars have placed much emphasis on the various steps describing the progression of conflicts – and their levels of contention – as they rise and fall in intensity over time. In particular, the label ‘conflict intensification’ refers to the transition from latent to overt (non-violent) conflicts (Fisher et al. 2000), while ‘conflict escalation’ describes an increase in the intensity and frequency of coercive and violent behaviour directed at the other party (Mitchell 2011). With regard to the dynamics of violent escalation by non-state armed groups, the term ‘radicalisation’, which stems from the field of social psychology, has become widely used in recent years in reference to “changes in beliefs, feelings and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify intergroup violence (...) in the context of non-state challenge to state authority” (McCauley and Moskaleiko 2008, 416). However, the term is usually employed in the context of individual (as opposed to collective) trajectories, and most authors also seem to associate it primarily with a cognitive – rather than behavioural – shift (Bartlett and Miller 2012, 2).

When it comes to de-escalatory processes, most social movement and terrorism scholars establish a distinction between the processes of disengagement and de-radicalisation (Dudouet 2015). The former refers to a behavioural shift whereby a person ceases his/her participation in violent activities, whereas the latter points to a social, psychological or ideological de-commitment from extremism and violence (Horgan 2009). According to Della Porta and Lafree (2012, 7), “even more than radicalization, the concept of de-radicalization suffers from a lack of precision concerning the actual processes involved”. While the terms ‘disengagement’ and ‘de-radicalisation’ are usually employed in the context of individual (as opposed to collective) trajectories, other scholars offer complex typologies of group de-escalation. For instance, according to Cronin (2011), the decline and demise of NSAGs proceed through six alternative trajectories: decapitation (through the capture or killing of the leadership), success (achieving the objective), failure (implosion, backlash or marginalisation), repression (through the use of force), negotiation (transition towards a legitimate political process), and finally a reorientation to other forms of violence (criminality, insurgency, major war).

These various studies, however, fail to address adequately the multi-dimensional nature of conflict (de-)escalation, especially in relation to the three main levels that matter most when analysing SJAGs, namely, their organisational, ideological and behavioural dimensions. We will hence describe here an analytical model which was developed for this research to explore the (de-)escalatory paths of SJAGs, partly inspired by the work of Ashour (2009) and Matesan (2016) on the trajectories of Islamist armed groups, complemented by references to our own research (Dudouet 2015) and supported by methodological insights on critical junctures (Soifer 2012). This approach focuses on a meso-level analysis of internal and external dynamics and factors influencing the conflict behaviour of armed actors, starting with an examination of internal collective processes within the ‘black box’ of SJAGs.

2.1.1 Conceptualising de-escalation: the three dimensions

Based on her doctoral research work, US scholar Emy Matesan (2016) introduced a helpful matrix to study the evolution of Islamist armed movements. This model presents eight stages of (de-)escalation based on the three dimensions of ideology, behaviour and organisational capacity, by distinguishing whether at a particular point in time (1) a group resorts to violent attacks, (2) the leaders of the group offer an ideological justification for violence and/or call for armed struggle, and (3) the group maintains a military wing or military stockpiles. Our initial research framework, developed prior to our fieldwork stage, was derived from this model by depicting conflict escalation by SJAGs in terms of their organisational dimension, i.e. their increasing organised capacity to mobilise and conduct coordinated violent activities ('formalisation'); their ideological dimension, i.e. their increasing rhetorical justification of 'jihadist' violence ('radicalisation'); and their behavioural dimension, through the expansion of their repertoire of violent tactics ('militarisation'). In turn, we described de-escalation as a process which may be pursued on the organisational level, through a reduction or loss of institutional capacity to coordinate violent operations ('demobilisation'); on the ideological level, through a moderation in the language and moral justification for violence ('de-radicalisation'); and finally on the behavioural level, through a decrease or cessation of violence altogether ('demilitarisation').

The added value of this analytical model is that it not only offers a dynamic (vs. static) depiction of SJAGs, but it also helps in tracing the process of transformation and in identifying mechanisms of change towards and away from violence. Indeed, based on the trajectories of three former Islamist groups (Darul Islam and Jama'a Islamiyyah in Indonesia, and Gama'a al-Islamiya in Egypt), Matesan identified three archetypes of de-escalation pathways: incapacitation (demilitarisation and demobilisation caused by a lack of capacity rather than a shift in ideological conviction – *Path 1*); adaptation (strategic decision not to employ violent tactics but neither ideology nor the armed wing has changed – *Path 2*); and disillusionment (complete de-escalation, driven by leaders re-evaluating the importance, necessity and legitimacy of violent strategies – *Path 3*).

	OPERATIONAL JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE		NO OPERATIONAL JUSTIFICATION OF VIOLENCE	
	VIOLENT TACTICS	NO VIOLENT TACTICS	VIOLENT TACTICS	NO VIOLENT TACTICS
ARMED WING	A ACTIVELY VIOLENT	B PASSIVELY VIOLENT	C ACTIVELY VIOLENT	D PASSIVELY VIOLENT
NO ARMED WING	E ACTIVELY VIOLENT	F PASSIVELY VIOLENT	G ACTIVELY VIOLENT	H NON-VIOLENT

Diagram illustrating de-escalation paths:

- Path 1:** From A (Armed Wing, Operational Justification, Violent Tactics) to F (No Armed Wing, Operational Justification, No Violent Tactics).
- Path 2:** From A (Armed Wing, Operational Justification, Violent Tactics) to B (Armed Wing, Operational Justification, No Violent Tactics).
- Path 3:** From A (Armed Wing, Operational Justification, Violent Tactics) to H (No Armed Wing, No Operational Justification, No Violent Tactics).

Table 1: De-escalation paths (Matesan 2016)

Despite the usefulness of this model in inspiring the overall research framework underpinning this study, when we started applying it to the three selected case studies, we came across a number of empirical challenges. First, we realised that the intricacies of de-escalation are not fully captured by binary and simplistic conceptualisations of ideology (justification for violence/or not), organisation (armed wing/or not) and behaviour (use of violence/or not). All these dimensions need to be broken down into several/multiple elements, and studied along a spectrum or a continuum ranging from moderate means (e.g. self-limited violence) and ends (e.g. negotiable goals) at one end, and radical means (e.g. mass atrocity crimes) and ends (e.g. extreme and unattainable goals) at the other.

Secondly, we found Matesan's definitions of the three categories to be overly narrow as they only capture one main feature of organisation, ideology and behaviour, while we felt that other features ought to be examined for a more sophisticated depiction of (de-)escalation pathways. For example, the organisational dynamics of SJAGs do not only refer to the presence (or absence) or an armed wing, but should also capture the process of institutionalisation, the degree of structural cohesion, the evolution of leadership, the group's control over territory or the exercise of governance functions within such territory. Similarly, the ideological dimension should also include other features besides the discursive justification for violence, including the nature of the goals pursued by the group, its territorial claims (national, cross-border, global) and the worldview enshrined in its goals (e.g. pluralist vs. Manichean). Finally, the behavioural dimension should not only capture the use of violence, but also assess its level and breadth (type and means of violence, nature of targets, frequency and geographic coverage of attacks, number of casualties, etc.).

A third challenge that we came across during the data analysis phase concerned the areas of strong overlap between ideological and organisational dynamics, which renders their distinction sometimes quite arbitrary. For example, when a group cuts its formal ties with the Islamic State (IS) or al-Qaeda, as the al-Nusra Front in Syria did in 2016 (formally) and 2017 (more substantially), this might be interpreted as both an organisational and an ideological shift. Furthermore, ideological or cognitive features of SJAGs can be hard to observe empirically. In the absence of public statements of intent signalling a change in the group's overarching goals or ideals (e.g. based on a re-interpretation of scriptures), an ideological revision or shift only becomes observable through a resulting organisational or behavioural change. Internal power struggles between pragmatists and ideologues could also be described either as an organisational development (leadership shift) or as an ideological shift towards (de-)radicalisation.

Fourthly, once we broke down the three analytical dimensions into various sub-components, we found that it was not always easy to cluster them along a (de-)escalatory spectrum. This was especially the case with organisational features. Some organisational elements, such as the formation or disbanding of an armed wing, or the capacity to coordinate violent operations, are quite straightforward. But other features, such as the degree of formalisation of the organisation, could be described either as an escalatory move (when a group expands its membership and its capacity to conduct complex coordinated attacks), or as a de-escalatory move (when the group consolidates itself by developing formal administrative or judicial structures and shifts its focus from violent insurgency to 'rebel governance').

Finally, and most importantly, we found Matesan's model of de-escalation to be of limited use to analyse the past trajectories of the three SJAGs under study since at the time of writing, they still have not de-escalated beyond 'cell A', in the sense that they still pursue violent tactics, justify their use, and have a fully functional armed wing. We realised that this framework could be used as inspiration for predicting future likely de-escalation scenarios (as will be analysed in Section 6) rather than as a model to trace the evolution of the groups so far. The next sub-section therefore describes the adapted framework that we developed to guide the case study research in Syria, Mali and Somalia.

2.1.2 Behavioural features of de-escalation: Strategic shifts as critical junctures

To address the aforementioned challenges and shortcomings, this study of SJAGs' conflict trajectories takes behavioural dynamics as the primary feature, or indicator, of de-escalation. Accordingly, ideological and organisational features are treated as contributory factors of change influencing the course of (de-) escalation (statisticians would call these factors 'independent variables').

As described above, behavioural (de-)escalation is measured through the level of violence used by these group against their stated enemies, including the state apparatus and its (perceived) domestic and international allies, as well as any civilians perceived to be opposed to their political project. Violence can be measured through their targets (e.g. specific or indiscriminate), the frequency of attacks, the number of casualties, etc.¹ Behavioural de-escalation is understood as a continuum from hard- to soft-power interaction within the main 'conflict dyad' between a SJAG and the state: de-escalation can be observed through a decrease in hard-power violent coercion and/or an increase in soft-power dialogue strategies towards peaceful political settlement.

Through field research on three cases of SJAGs, we were able to compile a detailed chronology of each group's (de-)escalation trajectories to date, and to identify major episodes of change within the behavioural dimension, which we labelled 'strategic shifts'. This term was used to distinguish strategically motivated changes in the overall behavioural patterns of the group, as opposed to tactical moves or short-lived evolutions over the course of the war. We also defined strategic shifts according to the concept and methodology of critical junctures as developed by Soifer (2012), which we felt would help us better capture the organisational and ideological factors allowing de-escalation to happen.

The concept of critical junctures was introduced in the fields of comparative history and politics to depict phases of uncertainty, fluidity and change created by an event or a series of events, leading to major decisions altering the course of an organisation (i.e. the concept can also be applied to an institution or an entire society), followed by longer periods of stability and adaptation (e.g. Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). While some argue that critical junctures are identified through the outcome (for example, by the level of change they bring), Soifer (2012) argues that it is more important to analyse exactly what allows and produces change in these moments and to define critical junctures according to a conceptual framework based on permissive and productive conditions. Permissive conditions determine the structural constraints on a given actor or organisation and can be internal as well as external factors (such as dependency on external funding, or the power structure within an organisation). Productive conditions determine the outcome of a critical juncture and are internal, agency-related factors (such as the belief that it is right to allow access for humanitarian actors). Only when both conditions come together, through a loosening of structural constraints that allows agency or contingency to shape divergence, is a critical juncture possible. When the permissive conditions are there but the productive conditions are not, this represents a missed window of opportunity (Soifer 2012).

While ideological and organisational dimensions of SJAGs are well-suited to identify internal permissive and productive conditions for strategic shifts to take place, they only describe what goes on within the group, and need to be complemented by external, environmental factors of change. In order to distinguish between internal and external permissive conditions, we broadened the scope of analysis based on existing literature on the de-escalation of non-state armed groups. Indeed, experts in political violence and conflict resolution have evidenced the multi-level factors that contribute to the demilitarisation of NSAGs and their transition to non-violent activism, negotiation or party politics (Dayton and Kriesberg 2009, Dudouet 2009, 2015, Cronin 2011, Berti 2013, Bosi and Della Porta 2015). As emphasised by Tilly (2003, 20),

¹ For a sophisticated measurement of 'patterns of political violence' based on repertoire, targeting, frequency and technique, see Gutiérrez Sanín and Wood (2017).

the repertoires of contentious politics employed by social actors are transformed over the course of physical and symbolic interactions and encounters, at the interpersonal or inter-group level, in a series of reciprocal adjustments. A wide range of studies point to various relational or environmental factors which might influence the behaviour of opposition groups, from the ‘political opportunity structure’ analysed by social movement theory, to the reciprocal dynamics between terrorism and state counter-terrorism policies emphasised by security experts, the concept of ‘ripeness’ promoted by conflict resolution scholars, and the transnational geopolitical dynamics favoured by international relations specialists. Our previous research on armed groups’ transformation into non-violent social movements was particularly helpful to disentangle intra-group, societal, relational (inter-actor) and contextual factors of change (Dudouet 2015). The research thus sought to identify the drivers of change located in the external environment in which SJAGs evolve, including their social interactions with community leaders and members, as well as the dynamics of power relations and mutual interactions with the state and other NSAGs, and the role of international factors (loss or gain of external patrons and allies, geopolitical dynamics, etc).

The next three sub-sections will analyse the role of ideology, organisational structure and external factors in influencing the course of key strategic shifts undergone by Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, al-Shabaab in Somalia and Ansar Dine in Mali. In the case study reports, we identified and analysed the following strategic shifts as critical junctures towards either escalatory or de-escalatory directions:

☰ **Ahrar al-Sham:**

- *Shift 1 – Riyadh conference:* In 2015, Ahrar al-Sham decided to participate in a conference in Riyadh that was supposed to unify the multiple Syrian opposition forces under one body to negotiate with the Syrian regime. Before that, Ahrar al-Sham had not been part of any formal political dynamics.
- *Shift 2 – Breaking point:* In 2016, the city of Aleppo was besieged by the Syrian regime and allied forces. Ahrar al-Sham (alongside other NSAGs) was in control of the besieged districts of the city. Under military pressure, the group negotiated directly with Russia for an evacuation agreement. Parallel to these events, the strained internal dynamics of Ahrar al-Sham were reaching breaking point. After the fall of Aleppo, the indecision on how to act with regard to a renewed effort for peace negotiations by the Russians proved too much for its organisational coherence and the more hardline factions split from the organisation and left a more nationalist-/revolutionary-minded Ahrar al-Sham in their wake.
- *Shift 3 – Astana talks:* In autumn 2017, Ahrar al-Sham participated in the internationally sponsored peace talks in Astana. They brought about an agreement on zones of de-escalation, which included Idlib, Ahrar al-Sham’s stronghold.

☰ **Al-Shabaab:**

- *Shift 1 – Consolidation and governance:* In 2009, Ethiopia withdrew its forces from Somalia. The resulting power void that the transitional Somali government could not fill was exploited by al-Shabaab, which expanded and consolidated its territorial control in Somalia. Overall, violence by al-Shabaab decreased during this period as it focused its attention on governance activities.
- *Shift 2 – The purge:* Starting in 2011, al-Shabaab increasingly came under military pressure from international and Somali forces and lost public support due to the high number of civilian deaths it caused. Internally, leaders began to question al-Shabaab’s strategy and the high costs in human life. These early dynamics of de-escalation were a window of opportunity, which remained untapped as the Emir of al-Shabaab brutally rid himself of these internal challengers in 2013.
- *Shift 3 – Reacting to popular backlash:* In October 2017, al-Shabaab carried out a massive double bombing attack in Mogadishu, which killed more than 500 people. The reaction from Somali society was unprecedented as tens of thousands of citizens protested against the violence. In the wake of this public outcry, al-Shabaab reduced the frequency of its attacks for several months.

☰ **Ansar Dine:**

- *Shift 1 – Ouagadougou negotiations:* After a coalition of SJAGs and Tuareg nationalist rebels took control over large areas of northern Mali in 2012, Ansar Dine participated in the Ouagadougou ceasefire negotiations in autumn 2012. However, its leader quickly opted out of the talks, which led to an internal split by a moderate faction that supported conflict resolution efforts.
- *Shift 2 – Deceptive cessation of hostilities:* The French military intervention, on behalf of the Malian government, pushed back Ansar Dine’s territorial control and the group went into hiding, ceasing its activities from October 2013 onwards. This deceptive cessation of hostilities lasted for a year.
- *Shift 3 – Creation of JNIM:* In 2017, Ansar Dine had a major escalatory shift with the formation of JNIM as an alliance of all al-Qaeda-linked SJAGs. This led to an increase and expansion of violent activities in new regions of Mali and the entire Sahel region.

It is also worth noting that during the research, we came across some dynamics that might paradoxically be interpreted as behavioural de-escalation in the broader context of the conflict, even if they did not imply a reduction of overall violence. This was the case, for example, in instances of in-fighting with other (more ‘extreme’) SJAGs in Syria. Rebel in-fighting was indeed a constant aspect of the Syrian civil war. During 2017-18, Ahrar al-Sham had more violent encounters with another SJAG, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, than with the Syrian regime. A reduction of violence within the main conflict dyad could thus be observed, yet the intensity of the violence per se was not affected.

2.2 Ideological factors of de-escalation

As stated above, the ideological dimension of SJAGs encompasses their socio-political as well as religious goals and worldview, and lies at the heart of their motivation for engaging in violent conflict. According to Ashour (2015, 175), “ideological de-radicalisation is a process in which a violently radical group reverses its ideology and de-legitimises the use of armed methods to achieve political goals while also moving towards an acceptance of gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context”. For his part, Aroua (2018, 27) defines de-radicalisation as a process of moderating the depth of change intended, either politically or towards religious orthodoxy. He distinguishes de-radicalisation from ‘de-extremisation’, which refers to a moderation of opinion or behaviour towards compliance with accepted norms and regulations. De-extremisation is measured against local society’s perception of what is moderate vs. extreme, as opposed to universal norms and regulations. Drevon (2020) also suggests the term ‘politicisation’ to depict the gradual evolution towards political pragmatism undergone by SJAGs (such as Ahrar al-Sham in Syria), which he defines as “the articulation of realistic strategic objectives, the establishment of stable relations with other armed groups and foreign states, and the development of reasonable patterns of interactions with the population”. This definition cuts across some of the distinctions established in this study between the ideological, behavioural and organisational dimensions, and once again points to their overlaps and interdependency.

Combining the definitions offered by Ashour and Aroua, we understand ideological de-radicalisation as a process through which a violently radical group moderates its ideology towards compliance with locally accepted (i.e. context-dependent) norms and rules. This moderation might include a shift in the content of political/religious ideology, and/or a shift in behavioural norms by de-legitimising the use of violent means, and/or a process-related shift towards accepting gradual (vs. revolutionary) social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context. This distinction between three facets of ideology as content, means and process allows a nuanced and fine-grained approach to de-radicalisation.

The terminology and approaches favoured in the field of CVE put a great deal of emphasis on the ‘extreme’ ideas professed by SJAGs and imply that ideological de-radicalisation (through prison rehabilitation

programmes and counter-narratives) is a necessary precondition for the peaceful transformation of their members and supporters into law-abiding citizens. What is the evidence for SJAGs' ideological shifts and their influence on de-radicalisation?

In none of the cases of SJAGs researched for this project did we observe any major changes in **their core goal** to build an Islamic state based on the Salafi interpretation of Islam. Any significant evolution in this regard also seems unlikely in the future, as it pertains to the *raison d'être* of the group, as one interviewee pointed out: *"They cannot change their goal of an Islamic state, it is what makes them Islamists."* (Interview with policy analyst on Syria, November 2018). Nonetheless, besides its core tenets such as the imposition of Sharia law, the concept of an Islamic state is not set in stone but open to interpretation. As will be further argued in Section 4, dialogue engagement towards SJAG members or proxies that purposefully seek to deconstruct their arguments around Islam do not seem to have had much success, according to both experts and practitioners (Interviews with senior mediator in May 2018, conflict resolution scholar in May 2018 and Islamist studies scholar in November 2018). Instead, such efforts at de-legitimising their religious arguments have at times increased resistance. Al-Shabaab, for example, began to target religious leaders who dared to speak up against its doctrine and justifications, including former teachers, and today religious scholars live in fear of the group. As argued by a local respondent: *"if it [dialogue engagement] is about service delivery or individual cases, usually clan elders do that kind of work. (...) But if it is about de-legitimising al-Shabaab or asking them to renounce their ideology, I think nobody in the clans dares to do that."* (Interview with Somali civil society representative, May 2018).

With regard to the ideological **justification of violent means**, the secondary literature on earlier cases of peaceful transformation by Islamist armed groups point to examples of de-legitimisation of violence (leading to a subsequent change in behaviour) which were not necessarily accompanied by a shift in the group's overall ideology and political project. In Egypt around 1997, the leaders of Gama'a al-Islamiya (GI) became disillusioned with the course of their armed insurgency, without undergoing a real ideological shift (Al-Hashimi and Goerzig 2011, Ashour 2015). The group developed a new religious frame de-legitimising violence and accepting 'the other' – not necessarily as an 'enemy'. But it did not embrace pluralistic principles, and still rejects democracy, based on its interpretation of Islam. As argued by Ashour (2015, 175), "many de-radicalised Islamist groups, including the GI, still uphold misogynist, homophobic, xenophobic and non-progressive views". Still, the group's partial ideological moderation preceded, and contributed to, its behavioural de-escalation. In other past cases, such ideological de-legitimisation of violence did not occur before a cessation of violence: in Algeria, the FIS/AIS agreed to a ceasefire in 1997 and two years later, a political settlement ('Civil Concord') was agreed, addressing the political dimensions of the conflict. The ideological dimension of FIS/AIS did not play a role in the ceasefire, which was instead caused by the group's realisation, under significant pressure and repression by the state, that there would be no military solution to the conflict (Ashour 2008). Ashour (ibid.) hence classifies the FIS/AIS as a case of 'pragmatic de-escalation' on the behavioural and organisational levels without an ideological or theological component de-legitimising the use of violence.

To achieve such transformation, both armed groups in Egypt and Algeria had come to accept that the **process of change** could no longer entail continued military insurgency. Instead, the groups embraced 'gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context', or more plainly came to recognise the fact that there were other actors with legitimate claims and/or power, and that these actors needed to be engaged through dialogue rather than through violent struggle. This shift from dogmatism to pragmatism (or realism) was a necessary step for political engagement and subsequent de-escalation. It helped, for example, to break the elitism that disdains other (non-Islamist) actors and opened the group towards engagement with a wider societal base. The trajectory of Hezb-e Islami in Afghanistan offers another illustrative example of de-radicalisation around the process for achieving its intended change, while the content of its ideology remains unchanged. When this Islamist armed group – which had been operating ever since the Soviet invasion in 1979 – entered into formal negotiations with the Afghan government in 2015, its ideological programme was already represented at the state level through

its affiliated political party Hezb-e Islami Afghanistan. Although radical by Western European standards, the worldview espoused by the group is not necessarily extreme for the Afghan context. De-radicalising its ideology was therefore not a stumbling block for the peace negotiations that led to behavioural de-escalation, concluded through the 2016 peace deal. And while it demobilised its capacity to conduct armed action, it did not de-legitimise the use of violence per se, claiming to have won as its core demand was achieved when the US announced its withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, and further arguing that it could better pursue its objectives through institutional politics (Rahim 2018).

In Syria, Ahrar al-Sham went through a similar partial process of de-radicalisation before it de-escalated towards political engagement by participating in the Riyadh conference in 2015. Religious-ideological disagreements with IS over the content of Salafism made Ahrar al-Sham's leaders distance themselves from the more radical SJAGs, turning away from extreme elitism, the self-claimed superiority as 'true believers', and outrageous behaviour that Ahrar al-Sham did not regard as justified (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019). Before ISIS entered the stage in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham was considered rather radical by observers (also furthered by its self-presentation) but suddenly appeared relatively moderate in comparison to ISIS. In 2014, in the wake of a "soul-searching moment" (Interview with Syria expert, November 2018), Ahrar al-Sham's leaders seemed to open up somewhat towards engagement with a wider set of actors in an effort to unify the Syrian opposition forces across the ideological divide, but the group neither de-legitimised violence nor changed the core of its ideological beliefs.

Overall, then, the common assumption that significant ideological changes are necessary for behavioural de-escalation to take place cannot be confirmed empirically. The most notable shift seems to occur in the de-legitimation of violent means to pursue the group's ideological project, and to a lesser extent in the process of achieving change. Beyond this, it may well be possible for key individuals within SJAGs to de-radicalise their ideology (be it at the level of process, means or goals) and subsequently disengage from the organisation. Some leaders of Ahrar al-Sham did undergo such individual reassessments of their beliefs. As a former member of Ahrar al-Sham stated: *"In early 2014, many leaders ... became disenchanted with some of their earlier beliefs, including in [their esteem for] al-Qaeda members. There was a large wave of review of their ideology and these reconsiderations [led to] Ahrar al-Sham's new positioning towards politics."* (Interview, December 2018). In rejection of ISIS's actions and justifications, these individuals shifted their narratives towards a more nationalist-revolutionary agenda. Yet the causality and real impact of individual de-radicalisation by a handful of leaders on the organisation's overall course of action are hard to assess. As argued earlier, ideological shifts only become visible when they translate into organisational or behavioural change. For example, the acceptance of a pluralist context may take shape through the group's increasing cooperation/interaction with its (former) political adversaries. As argued by Munson (2016), "the fetish of ideology that has characterized terrorism studies for years now continues to blind analysts to the reality that ideology is an emergent quality of organizational dynamics, not an essentialized category that determines and defines such dynamics". The next sub-section thus turns to organisational factors of de-escalation.

2.3 Organisational factors of de-escalation

"An armed group's organizational structure is an important determinant of its behaviour" (ICRC 2018, 21). The organisational dimension of SJAGs describes, on the one hand, their structural features, such as their degree of formalisation and cohesion, command and control levels and capacity for collective armed action, territorial control and parallel governance functions. On the other hand, it also depicts the evolving in-group dynamics that shape and determine the structural features of SJAGs. Scholars working on NSAGs and social movements have highlighted the fact that social organisations are not homogeneous entities, and their behaviour results from in-group interactions (e.g. Pearlman 2010, Lilja 2010). The organisational

dimension thus takes into account who is involved in decision-making and how their choices influence those of the other members (Pearlman 2010, 198). In-group dynamics may be described as occurring along two axes. The horizontal axis describes the balance of power within the leadership, for example between ideologues, strategists and pragmatists (Hermann and Gerard 2009). Vertical relationships describe the top-down and bottom-up dynamics between the leadership, members and broader constituency or support group (Al-Hashimi and Goerzig 2011, Dudouet 2009).

What is the empirical evidence for the impact of organisational dynamics on the behaviour of SJAGs? Concerning the structural features of these groups, an expert on Ahrar al-Sham argues that the group's **institutionalisation** (consolidation of its organisational structure around shared norms and values and internal bureaucratisation) took place in parallel to its politicisation (Drevon 2020). Ahrar al-Sham developed its internal structure based on the model of the Palestinian organisation Hamas, and, for example, introduced a dedicated body for public relations to facilitate engagement with external audiences (Interview with Syria expert, August 2018). This organisational development created a dynamic of its own, and the process of institutionalisation promoted the option of strategic dialogue engagement. In Somalia, the institutionalisation of al-Shabaab led to a decrease in violent attacks against the Somali state in 2009 while it expanded its governance activities in a situation of power dominance, also called its "golden age" (Hansen 2013). This indicator of behavioural de-escalation might not necessarily signal the group's interest in conflict settlement, but could rather be linked to a strategic shift towards consolidation, by building up its bureaucratic governance structure to meet the requirements for establishing tighter control over its newly gained territory (Marchal 2011, Göldner-Ebenthal 2019).

Findings from the case studies also point to the crucial relevance of the **governance factor**. Many interviewees across the three cases argued that once SJAGs control territory and develop closer relations with the population, especially through service provision, their leaders become more pragmatic in their attitudes and behavioural choices – such as their interpretation and application of Sharia law or their position towards dialogue and negotiation – in order to develop or maintain popular support from their local constituency. For Ahrar al-Sham, the de-escalatory effect of civilian interactions was demonstrated in several instances. During the battle of Aleppo in late 2016, the panic and suffering of civilians caught in the besieged city under their control created significant pressure for the group leaders. As quoted by Heller (2017): "The main obstacle in our way was the presence of civilians," said negotiator and Ahrar al-Sham commander al-Farouq Abu Bakr. "Until the last moment, we were calling for the exit of these civilians, without us leaving, but the Russian side stubbornly insisted that everyone had to leave or they would keep bombing." This civilian pressure led to the first instance of Ahrar al-Sham's direct dialogue with Russia on ceasefire negotiations in Aleppo.

In Mali, various SJAGs' governance approaches had an undeniable impact on the features of violence employed by these groups to 'tame' the population under their control or to regulate social relations. Several experts point to a differentiated application of Sharia law (moderate/flexible vs. extreme/brutal) by Ansar Dine and other SJAGs in the Malian cities under their control prior to the French military intervention in January 2013, depending on the relations established with local elites and the population. According to a research study conducted by Yvan Guichaoua and Ferdaous Bouhleb for the ICRC, which compares MUJAO in Gao and Ansar Dine in Kidal, Ansar Dine's "relative restraint, when compared with MUJAO's, was strongly attributed to its community links and the moderating voice of local qadis [i.e. Islamic judges]" (ICRC 2018, 50). This differing social embeddedness of the two groups might explain, for instance, why Ansar Dine – in contrast to MUJAO – banned forced marriage, mistreatment of detainees and the taking of foreign hostages (ibid., 48).

In Somalia, interviewees pointed to the fact that even though al-Shabaab controls a large territory, it cannot do so completely against the local clans' interests. Nevertheless, the group seems less responsive to the local population in comparison with the examples mentioned above, as its refusal to allow international aid during the 2011 and 2017 famines seems to indicate. This behavioural trait is partly influenced by an organisational feature of the group: al-Shabaab is known to frequently rotate its fighters and commanders,

including their clan affiliations, to purposely avoid the build-up of rapport between the population and its members (Toros and Harley 2018).

A loss of territory can also affect behavioural de-escalation. For Ahrar al-Sham, the loss of much of its previously controlled territory brought along a loss of income from local taxes or businesses, which in turn affected the group's capacities for armed action (i.e. fighters and equipment). Yet in the cases of al-Shabaab and Ansar Dine, territorial losses did not lastingly affect their violent behaviour but determined how they were fighting and organising themselves. They were forced to shift from an open insurgency structure to more clandestine cell networks that would carry out hit-and-run terrorist attacks or apply guerrilla tactics instead of engaging in open warfare.

When it comes to in-group dynamics, **horizontal power relations** within the leadership had a strong influence on behavioural change. The often-described binary polarisation between moderates and hardliners did play a role in the evolution of all three SJAGs, as one expert described for the case of Syria: "Ahrar al-Sham were standing on one radical and one revolutionary leg and had to balance between them." (Interview with Syria expert, November 2018). These binary categories are often portrayed simplistically, however, and one should not assume, for instance, that military leaders are necessarily more hardline than political figures. This is illustrated by the trajectory of the FIS/AIS in Algeria, where the 1997 ceasefire agreement came about thanks to the government's decision to bypass the political negotiators (FIS) in favour of direct negotiations with its military wing (AIS). When AIS's leader Madani Mezraq took over the negotiations, his internal legitimacy and tight control over fighters, and hence his ability to maintain coherence and secure internal backing for the new strategy, facilitated his negotiations with General Isma'il Lamari, Deputy Head of Military Intelligence (Khatib 2006). This is consistent with research findings on peace processes with NSAGs which indicate that military leaders with strong authority and internal legitimacy might bring their movements forward more effectively than isolated soft-leaning moderates (Dudouet 2009). Based on the case of GI in Egypt, Ashour (2015) points to a similar trend with Islamist armed groups, highlighting especially the role of leaders' charisma and religious authority in facilitating de-radicalisation while preventing factionalisation:

Since change in general, and change towards demilitarisation in particular, is often conflated with 'betraying the struggle' in many militant Islamist movements, only a leadership that is perceived by the majority of the followers as credible, pious, theologically knowledgeable and, preferably, with a history of 'struggle' (usually armed action against 'secular' national regimes or against foreign military presence or invasion) could cast legitimacy on the de-radicalisation processes. ... Without a leadership having these characteristics, armed Islamist movements tend to fragment under state repression. In most cases, that fragmentation leads to splintering and further radicalisation in the form of anti-civilian violence and extreme anti-system ideologies perpetrated and upheld by loosely-structured organisations. Also, fragmentation may engender internal violence within the same very same organisation. (Ashour 2015, 176-177).

Based on our three primary case studies, 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. The contestation of power and strategic choices led to fragmentation in the Syrian and Mali cases, through a splinter group escalating its violent behaviour (in Syria) or de-escalating and adopting a pro-negotiation stance (in Mali). In Mali, the Ouagadougou ceasefire talks in 2012 caused Ansar Dine to splinter, with one faction (led by Alghabass Ag Intallah, Cheikh Ag Aoussa and Ahmed Ag Bibi) leaving the organisation and continuing on the path to negotiated de-escalation. Hardliners rallied around the central leadership figure of Iyad Ag Ghaly and resumed fighting with new allies from the Salafi jihadi scene who had been excluded from the peace negotiations (ICG 2013). In Syria, Ahrar al-Sham splintered in early 2017 after the fall of Aleppo and Russian efforts to re-start peace negotiations; these developments provoked a dissension caused by longstanding disagreements within the leadership. In the wake of the

split, Ahrar al-Sham moved closer to mainstream opposition forces and eventually participated in the sixth round of Astana peace talks. The more hardline faction merged with politically-excluded Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (formerly the al-Nusra Front) and further escalated its violence to fight rebel competitors for dominance, which eventually escalated to the level of a ‘mini-civil war’ within the north Syrian province of Idlib (Interview with policy analyst, November 2018; also Heidar 2018). In both cases, these internal dynamics furthered de-escalation by provoking discussion on alternative strategic options. Nonetheless, in both cases, not all members embraced the shift towards moderation: if the internal command and control structures are too weak, and the coherence of the group is affected by internal debates on strategy, the full potential for de-escalation remains elusive. In the Mali case, the central leadership was hardline-leaning and too strong to be influenced by moderates, leading to a splintering by the latter. In the Syrian case, the central leadership was more moderate but not strong enough to prevent a splintering of the hardliners.

In Somalia, al-Shabaab experienced a similar horizontal power struggle in 2012/2013 when internal dissenting voices were challenging the central leadership on strategy, but these were violently silenced by the then leader Godane. There have been no known cases of major internal dissent ever since. The command and especially control functions of al-Shabaab’s Amniyat have been effective in preventing any potentially dissenting leadership figures from being outspoken and promoting a discussion on strategy.

Finally, the role of **vertical dynamics** in incentivising de-escalation played out in some of the cases, especially in the form of bottom-up pressure by the movement’s base expressing war fatigue as result of prolonged state repression. This factor was cited for the cases of GI in Egypt, FIS/AIS in Algeria and LIFG in Libya (Ashour 2011), as well as Hezb-e Islami in Afghanistan, whose fighters and families in the Pakistani-Afghan borderlands pressured the leadership to negotiate a deal that would allow them to return to Afghanistan (Rahim 2018). In the case of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, internal bottom-up pressure did not primarily support de-escalation but rather created difficulties for leaders promoting de-escalation, as their efforts to create an international image of moderation and openness towards dialogue and a pluralist perception of the conflict created severe internal bottom-up backlash (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019; see more on this point in Sections 4 and 5).

2.4 External factors of de-escalation

Besides the ideological and organisational dimensions outlined above, various external factors have affected SJAGs’ strategic shifts towards de-escalation, by influencing their internal dynamics in favour of either continued militancy or strategic innovation. As argued by the Northern Irish mediation expert Clem McCartney, behavioural shifts within movements do not result solely from a change of beliefs by individual leaders or an internal power shift (e.g. between ‘hawks’ and ‘doves’); they are also the outcome of inferences drawn from external events, which in turn affect the internal balance of arguments. “When those circumstances favour maintaining the war then the doves will be silent but when circumstances favour negotiations then the hawks will be silent.” (McCartney 2005, 6). External factors will be examined here on three levels of analysis, by reviewing mechanisms at play in the groups’ interactions with other societal actors, with the state, and with their international environment, as depicted in Table 2 below.

Levels of analysis	Mechanisms of change
Group-society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pressure from (existing or potential) allies or social constituency – Coalition-building with other socio-political forces – Mirroring a strategy that has been proved effective by other groups – ‘Reversed outbidding’ to emphasise one’s distinction from competitors
Group-state	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mutually hurting stalemate – Sustained state repression of dissent – Selective state inducement and political opportunities
Group-international	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Loss of foreign support and search for new allies – Emulation of successful regional/international models

Table 2: External mechanisms of de-escalation (adapted from Dudouet 2015)

≡ Societal factors

The first factor listed in Table 2 at the group-society level is the role of **societal pressure**, either by the population of the SJAG-controlled territory or by the broader society. It mirrors the in-group bottom-up dynamics described earlier, but goes beyond the group’s support base. The governance factor outlined above also plays along these lines and made Ahrar al-Sham, for example, receptive to the plight of the civilians in besieged Aleppo in 2016. The relationship between SJAGs and the society in which they evolve is strongly influenced by the local governance functions performed by the groups. Beyond these mutual day-to-day interactions, the self-perception of SJAGs is to promote an Islamist state for the benefit of all (Sunni) Muslims; their perceived constituency is consequently much broader than the population under their control and other civilians directly supporting them. Efforts to preach and promote their interpretation of Islam are motivated by their belief that Muslims just need to be guided on the ‘right path’. They are therefore likely to be receptive to public displays of support or disapproval of their policies and behaviour.

In Somalia, public discontent with al-Shabaab’s violent upsurges was expressed most powerfully when tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets of Mogadishu after a massive suicide attack killed more than 500 civilians at a busy crossroads in the capital city (Sheikh 2017). The group neither claimed nor denied its responsibility for the attack, but this gruesome episode prompted a phase of de-escalation as the number of attacks was severely reduced in the following weeks (Göldner-Ebenthal 2019). A less direct effect of public discontent had also been observed a few years earlier. During 2009-2013, al-Shabaab lost some of its popular support as the numbers of Somali Muslim casualties grew when the group widened its range of targets to include any civilian that supported the government, for example by working for a ministry or as a contractor. On top of such indiscriminate killing, al-Shabaab refused to allow international aid into regions under its control during a famine in 2011. These regions were hit hard by a drought and subsequent famine, and up to 250,000 people lost their lives (Bajoria 2011). The resulting public discontent contributed to the emergence of in-group tensions as leaders disagreed on whether to grant access to international aid, or on the legitimacy of killing civilian Muslims. As outlined above, these in-group dynamics did not lead to de-escalation as dissenters were severely repressed. Nonetheless, the societal factor played a role in inducing a (missed) opportunity for de-escalation by promoting internal debate within the organisation.

Another societal factor contributing to strategic shifts is the interface with ‘competitors’ operating in the same social space, especially other armed groups. Across the various case studies, the most relevant mechanism cited in Table 2 is ‘**reversed outbidding**’, i.e. de-escalatory moves aimed at emphasising their distinction from more violent groups. In Syria, Ahrar al-Sham experienced such dynamics with IS and al-Nusra, seeking to distance itself from the international attention received by these two groups, and making an effort to avoid being listed as a terrorist group by the UN. As a high-ranking member of Ahrar al-Sham explained: “*The signing of the covenant of honour [in May 2014, also known as the Revolutionary Charter] occurred because of the international context. Western countries did not differentiate among the armed Islamist groups active in Syria. We were described as terrorist and this impacted our relations with other actors. We wanted a response to that.*” (Interview, August 2018). It also profited directly from being perceived as the ‘moderate’ option when international funding became more restrictive for NGOs operating in territories controlled by terror-listed groups. As one expert pointed out: “*Ahrar al-Sham benefited from appearing as the ‘good’ choice in comparison to HTS and attracted more funding for the people under their control.*” (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, November 2018). In Afghanistan, Hezb-e Islami sought to reach an agreement with the Afghan government in a move to pre-empt its Taliban ‘competitors’, fearing that the opening of negotiations between the government and the Taliban could render them insignificant by comparison and lower their bargaining power. “*Seeing that the Afghan conflict was faced with a major stalemate, the group recognised that it could only be resolved through negotiations. The additional concern that the Taliban might participate in a peace process and eclipse Hezb-e Islami pushed the group’s pro-peace leaders to step up their efforts for peace and reconciliation.*” (Rahim 2018, 8). In Algeria, the FIS refused for a long time to distance itself from the GIA, a more extreme and brutal splinter group, until the state’s backlash on GIA activities prompted it to seek alternative strategies (Kattib 2006). These examples illustrate the logic of reversed outbidding, a strategy aimed at securing the benefits that an improved image in public opinion or among international actors can garner.

In other cases, however, competition from other Salafi jihadi actors tended to inhibit de-escalation, as the potential benefits were outweighed by the potential costs of alienating the (international) Salafi jihadi support scene. In Mali, international mediators, and Algeria especially, tried to provoke a reversed outbidding effect by exerting pressure on Ansar Dine to distance itself from its more extremist allies AQIM and MUJAO. They believed that negotiating with ‘local’ armed groups, specifically Ansar Dine and the nationalist-separatist Tuareg armed group MNLA, was possible as opposed to the more “global jihadist” groups (Lebovich 2013). In parallel, Ansar Dine delegates also took part in ceasefire negotiations in Ouagadougou alongside the MNLA and the Malian government. The result of the talks and the division attempt was that Ansar Dine splintered, with one faction staying on a negotiation path while the main group aligned and eventually merged with the other Salafi jihadi actors. Justifying a strategic shift towards their international Salafi jihadi audience can pose a difficulty for SJAGs, as their arguments for change can easily be attacked and de-legitimised. As a former member of Ahrar al-Sham explained: “*Al-Nusra was accusing Ahrar al-Sham of being soft and weak and deviating from the right path. This affected Ahrar al-Sham very much because they were entirely new to the territory [of political negotiations] and it played into the hands of the internal opposition but also on the doubts the leaders themselves had entering this new territory.*” (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019, 26). Fighters and potential recruits but also international funding sources create competition among SJAGs, and represent a source of fragility as they can be easily attacked on their ideological base for being too soft or compromising. SJAGs’ relationships with the Salafi jihadi scene, on the one hand, and with their perceived social constituents, on the other hand, create the two coordinate axes along which they have to shift and balance their allegiances. In cases where several SJAGs operate in the same territory, as in Syria, Mali and Algeria, this balance is more difficult to manage than in countries with one dominant SJAG, such as Somalia.

The **mirroring effect** listed in Table 2 refers to a movement adopting a strategy used by other groups that has proven effective in terms of attracting support or effecting change (Dudouet 2015). This mechanism was not observed in the three primary cases under investigation, but it occurred in Egypt and Algeria,

where the demilitarisation of a violent Islamist group influenced others to pursue de-radicalisation paths. This was notably the case with the GI and al-Jihad Organisation in Egypt, but also in Algeria between the FIS and other smaller Islamist militias as well as factions from the GIA and the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC) (Ashour 2015). Finally, with regard to the mechanism of **coalition-building**, there were several instances of SJAGs allying with other Islamist, revolutionary or nationalist armed groups (less so with civilian or peaceful social entities) in the course of their conflict trajectory, but we did not find any instances where these attempts to join forces with other groups led to a behavioural de-escalation.

≡ Relational (group-state) factors

For all cases, group-state dynamics were of great relevance for the SJAGs' de-escalation. In the literature on NSAGs, it is argued that political negotiations between a state and its armed contenders most often occur when inter-party material and perceptual (military, political, social, economic, symbolic, legal, etc.) asymmetry shifts, so that both adversaries recognise the other's ability to frustrate their chances of success. This has been described as a "**mutually hurting stalemate**" (Zartman 2000), allied to the concept of "ripe moment": that brief moment when the playing field is acceptably level for both sides and talks become possible (Miall, Ramsbotham and Woodhouse 1999). In Somalia, many interviewees attributed al-Shabaab's sustained existence to the fact that the Somali state is too weak, despite the backing of its international allies: too weak to control and govern its own territory but also too weak to exert sufficient military pressure on al-Shabaab. However, the fact that al-Shabaab does not show any interest in exploring alternatives to violent insurgency indicates that its leaders do not perceive their group to be in a situation of mutually hurting stalemate. In Mali, Ansar Dine leaders' belief in their military superiority may have provoked the failure of (short-lived) negotiations with the government in Ouagadougou in late 2012, while it was in control of large swathes of territory in northern Mali, and faced a weak government that had crumbled after an attempted coup d'état (Roetman, Migeon and Dudouet 2019).

In other cases, the high and sustained level of **state repression** resulted in significantly reduced capacities for the SJAG, which increased the appeal of (negotiated or unilateral) de-escalation. This was the case in Egypt, Libya, Afghanistan and Algeria (GIA) as well as for Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, where the power asymmetry increased in favour of the state when it received support from Russian intervention in 2015. Eventually, this asymmetry became decapitating for Ahrar al-Sham: "*[Ahrar al-Sham in Aleppo] was facing down a regime whose allies, Russia and Iran, were willing to do whatever it took to ensure its victory. Rebels' backers were never ready to match that commitment.*" (Heller 2017).

For some of these groups (in Afghanistan, Egypt and Algeria), repression was accompanied with **inducements** for de-escalation in a combined carrot and stick approach, in the form of invitations to dialogue accompanied by the lure of direct 'peace dividends' for the group or its members (e.g. offers of amnesty or political participation). But in Syria, the peace negotiations have had little to offer so far to SJAGs such as Ahrar al-Sham. They became a long succession of talks which achieved very little and became increasingly dominated by regional and global actors while Syrians became disconnected from the process. In Somalia, the few official calls for dialogue directed towards al-Shabaab were accompanied by amnesty offers to lure individual fighters to disengage from the group and, simultaneously, by threats of further escalation of the war. Such multi-pronged communication efforts sent mixed signals about the reliability and intentions of the government. Other potential incentives, such as the option to build power through politics, were effectively mismanaged when Mukhar Rowbow, an al-Shabaab leader who had defected, was imprisoned by the government in autumn 2018, just when it seemed likely he would become president of Southwest State, one of the seven semi-autonomous regions of Somalia.

☰ International factors

In all three primary cases examined in this research, international actors have had significant influence on the course of the conflict. The three governments concerned are backed by extensive military support: France and MINUSMA in Mali, the US and AMISOM in Somalia, Russia and Iran in Syria. In addition, up to 11 foreign states are involved as direct conflict stakeholders in Syria. SJAGs also benefit from international support networks, but only Ahrar al-Sham had significant connections and material support from foreign states, mainly Turkey and Qatar. Only in this case, therefore, could the (threatened) loss of foreign backing play a role in supporting de-escalation. Its international sponsors' **threat to reduce or withdraw support** for Ahrar al-Sham incentivised its participation in international dialogue efforts. Indeed, Turkey pushed for Ahrar al-Sham's participation in the Riyadh conference in December 2015 in an attempt to distinguish the group and its allies in the Islamic Front (which Turkey supported) from more extreme groups such as ISIS. Its growing dependence on Turkey led Ahrar al-Sham to participate in the sixth round of the Astana talks in September 2017 in order to show itself as a reliable follower of Turkey, which had been looking at other groups to support with Ahrar al-Sham losing power in Syria.

In addition to diplomatic and financial support or pressure, foreign troops' intervention or withdrawal also induced (de-)escalatory dynamics in all three countries. In Mali and Somalia, this played into the hands of the SJAGs by increasing their patriotic appeal against the occupiers. Foreign military interventions in Somalia by Ethiopia, Kenya and AMISOM increased al-Shabaab's nationalist messaging alongside its commitment to jihadism, which bolstered its legitimacy claim as defending Somalia from foreign invasion. In Mali, anti-French and anti-Western sentiment has been growing in recent years. The French army is increasingly seen as an occupying force (Bensimon 2019; Guichaoua 2019), and the targeting of armed forces by Ansar Dine and JNIM, which has been increasing since 2016, could be trying to play into that rejection. Moreover, the international intervention in Mali seems to be counter-productive: "the strategy of killing JNIM members is simply leading to more recruits. By conducting targeted strikes, France certainly eliminates jihadist fighters but it also eliminates people with a more ambiguous profile, such as JNIM supporters without a military function, whose deaths may meet with local disapproval and disrupt attempts at political dialogue." (Roetman, Migeon and Dudouet 2019, 32). By contrast, in Afghanistan, the US's announcement of significant troop withdrawals incentivised Hezb-e Islami to engage in a peace process by fulfilling one of its central demands (Rahim 2018).

Finally, the role of **cross-border diffusion** through emulation of successful transitions in the regional or international environment is worth noting. Several past SJAGs learnt from each other's experiences. This happened with LIFG in Libya and FIS in Algeria, which both looked towards GI's experience in Egypt as a model for effective de-escalation (Ashour 2015). However, there is no indication that the members of contemporary SJAGs consider these past transitions as positive models from which to gain inspiration. Indeed, an interviewed former member of Ahrar al-Sham (December 2018) pointed out that there are no credible or inspiring models of SJAG de-escalation to emulate – none of the formerly known cases of Islamist-based NSAGs have succeeded in achieving their historical goals non-violently. The current negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan might prove to be an important turning point in the future.

2.5 Synthesis: multi-level drivers of change

In assessing our findings on the question of what affects the de-escalation of Salafi jihadi armed groups, we apply Soifer's critical juncture approach introduced in Section 2.1 to the key instances of strategic shifts identified in the three primary case studies, before making some more general observations on the mechanisms supporting larger de-escalation processes.

The first observation is that there does not seem to be a single or predominant set of permissive and productive conditions explaining de-escalatory shifts. First, **permissive (structural) conditions** allowing change to happen can be both external and internal: an increase in power asymmetry in favour of the state, the threat thereof, e.g. through a threatened terror listing, or alternatively increased military pressure from other NSAGs, are three of the most relevant external permissive conditions. Public discontent or civilian suffering also raised external pressure and functioned as a permissive condition in three identified instances of behavioural de-escalation. In two of the shifts, both of these external factors came together, as in the siege of Aleppo in 2016 when Ahrar al-Sham negotiated evacuation agreements. Permissive conditions also included the emergence of external 'opportunity structures' for dialogue. This was the case, for example, with the (short-lived) participation of Ansar Dine in the Ouagadougou talks in 2012, which was facilitated by Burkina Faso and Algeria. In some instances of de-escalation, these external permissive conditions were not sufficient to provoke de-escalation. They had to be accompanied by internal permissive conditions in the form of horizontal power shifts (or threatened power shifts) that opened the door for a new strategy to be promoted, i.e. for the necessary productive condition to take effect.

These **productive (agency-based) conditions**, which can also be depicted as ideas, impulses or reactions that determine and legitimise the behavioural change, varied around three themes: survival, alternative strategies of goal achievement, and gaining or maintaining social legitimacy. Survival, unsurprisingly, was a dominant productive condition when military pressure was high, as with Ahrar al-Sham during the Aleppo siege. The second theme, achieving their goal by altering their strategy, featured prominently across the cases. Ansar Dine, influenced by the 'moderate' tier of leaders, attempted to pursue its goal of establishing an Islamic state through negotiation, before changing its course of action again. The third theme refers to SJAGs' drive to sustain a reputation as legitimate governance actors, or more generally their sensitivity to public support, among their constituency or population under their control. This factor came up repeatedly during fieldwork, and was particularly significant in instances such as Ahrar al-Sham's decision to attend the Astana talks in 2017, or violence reduction by al-Shabaab following the public outcry caused by the 2017 Mogadishu bombing. This is an important finding, as SJAGs are often portrayed as predatory or extremist actors that are unresponsive to the population's needs. These instances show that under the right permissive conditions, SJAGs can be quite responsive in this regard. Yet these productive conditions may not be equally valued by the groups. Survival and goal achievement might rank above social legitimacy in their hierarchy of strategic priorities, which could explain why responsiveness to public discontent or suffering is not consistent; one example is al-Shabaab's refusal to accept international aid to alleviate the massive suffering of civilians during a famine in 2011.²

As demonstrated in this section, additional data from other cases of Islamist armed groups which underwent more comprehensive de-escalation trajectories (Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Afghanistan) confirm and reinforce these findings from Syria, Mali and Somalia. Across all these cases, external mechanisms of change, such as pressure from 'above' (foreign patrons) and from 'below' (society), inter-group reversed outbidding or mirroring dynamics, and state inducements through negotiation overtures or amnesty offers had a significant influence on strategic reconsiderations by the groups, which in turn acted as productive

2 As argued by the International Crisis Group (2017, 4), by refusing to allow aid organisations access and blocking drought victims' exodus towards areas with aid access, al-Shabaab kept the local population hostage, "arguably because of its heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability – a realisation that mass depopulation might expose it to aerial and ground attacks".

conditions for behavioural de-escalation. Yet external factors are not necessarily sufficient to promote de-escalation, and they need to be combined with organisational factors (as internal permissive conditions), such as horizontal power shifts within the group or functional shifts towards governance roles in controlled territories, that promote new ideas within the leadership or increase its sensitivity to public preferences and societal demands for change.

Finally, the impact of ideological factors as productive conditions for de-escalation seems more ambivalent. In two cases of comprehensive de-escalation trajectories (GI in Egypt and AIS in Algeria), the groups did not undergo a complete ideological de-radicalisation, but de-legitimised the use of violence, and accepted the idea of ‘gradual social, political and economic changes within a pluralist context’. These indicators of de-radicalisation could be described as productive conditions for de-escalation as they relate to the search for alternative strategies of goal attainment.

What is, finally, the role of political dialogue in these various trajectories? In this section, we analysed dialogue engagement as an indicator of behavioural de-escalation (signalling a shift from hard-power to soft-power means), and indeed as a strategic shift marker, resulting from various permissive and productive conditions. Based on the critical juncture model, instances of engagement through formal negotiation can be described as a direct result of SJAGs’ exploration of alternative strategies of goal attainment, as illustrated in the cases of Ahrar al-Sham in 2015 (Riyadh conference) and 2017 (Astana talks) and Ansar Dine in 2012 (Ouagadougou talks). In the next two sections, by contrast, we will look at these dynamics in reverse, by examining to what extent dialogue engagement could constitute an external permissive condition for a comprehensive behavioural de-escalation. For this purpose, it might be useful to introduce a third component of critical junctures: **critical antecedents**. According to the literature, these operate before the critical juncture and are connected to the productive conditions by influencing their value and hence the outcome of the critical juncture (Slater and Simmons 2010, Soifer 2012). Third-party engagement – especially through informal dialogue – could act as a critical antecedent by promoting ideological ‘process change’ – influencing in turn their increased interest in formal peace negotiations.

In the next section, we will map instances of third-party engagement by local, national or international actors (including humanitarian agencies, human rights activists, diplomats, security agents, religious or customary authorities) in pursuit of various objectives such as humanitarian access, prisoner exchanges, compliance with international humanitarian law, ceasefire and peace talks, or religious dialogue. Section 4 will then seek to link back engagement and de-escalation in order to ‘test’ whether and under what conditions it can indeed become a critical antecedent for strategic shifts towards de-escalation.

3 Mapping past experiences of dialogue engagement

While constructive third-party engagement (such as humanitarian dialogue or political negotiations) with NSAGs has been extensively analysed, there is still very little documentation of past dialogue experiences with SJAGs more specifically – partly for legal and security reasons, as most of these actors face terrorist proscription regimes. External interactions with NSAGs are typically clustered into hard- and soft-power approaches (Jones and Libicki 2008, Dudouet 2010). Hard-power (or coercive) approaches tend to prioritise military, policing or judicial instruments (e.g. counter-insurgency, proscription and related sanctions, international criminal prosecution) in order to defeat, repress and/or decapitate armed groups. However, scholars have shown that in asymmetric conflicts the stronger incumbents are often unable to defeat weaker insurgents (Lyal and Wilson 2009, Arreguin-Toft 2010, Connable and Libicki 2010) due to a wide range of factors, from geography, population and external support to military tactics and strategies. In the field of security studies, ending internal conflicts by military means is contested as well. Critics point out that military victory is not possible either because conventional military force is not suitable (Van Creveld 2008), the necessary resources and political will to deal with the ‘long conflict strategy’ of many NSAGs are lacking (McKenzie 2011), or even that in the case of a military success, peace will not be established but war merely contained (Smith 2005).

Empirical evidence also suggests that political conflicts cannot be resolved through force only. For instance, a quantitative study conducted by the RAND Corporation (Jones and Libicki 2008) shows that among 268 identified ‘terrorist groups’ that ended their activities between 1968 and 2006, only 20 (7%) were defeated militarily. By contrast, 107 (40%) were dismantled through policing (i.e. decapitation), and 114 (43%) joined the political mainstream. While policing was mostly effective in cases of small terrorist cells, the most common trajectory for groups above 1,000 members was a conversion to unarmed politics. Considering that SJAGs have been on the rise in the last few years (Svensson and Nilsson 2017, Melander, Pettersson and Themnér 2016), despite concerted efforts by the targeted governments and their allies to defeat them by military, policing or judicial means, hard-power approaches have thus far proven unsuccessful in reaching their assigned goals.

The limitations posed by hard-power strategies have prompted analysts to explore alternative tools that have been, or may be, employed by external third parties to promote the de-escalation of armed conflicts with NSAGs, through a vast array of soft-power (or non-coercive) approaches. In the context of this research, we use the generic term ‘engagement’ in reference to soft-power physical interaction with SJAGs through dialogue and negotiation processes, for either humanitarian purposes (e.g. access, prisoner release/exchange, advocacy on international humanitarian law (IHL), ceasefire negotiations) or political objectives (i.e. peace process). Engagement goes well beyond formal or official negotiations, and may be defined as any interaction between third parties and armed groups with the goal of conversing, carrying messages, advising and facilitating dialogue (Whitfield 2010).

This section takes the existing literature on dialogue engagement with NSAGs as a starting point, and aims to apply it to SJAGs through empirical evidence from Syria, Somalia and Mali (and occasional references to other cases). It will successively review the types (*who*), aims (*why*), and entry points (*how*) of third-party soft-power engagement with SJAGs. The following section (Section 4) will then address a number of challenges impeding engagement, and expand on the question of timing (*when*), and especially the issue of causal dynamics and sequencing between engagement and de-escalation.

3.1 Types of third parties

In existing research on dialogue and negotiation with NSAGs, the term ‘third parties’ variously refers to actors such as states and international organisations, international NGOs (e.g. Hofmann and Schneckener 2011), or ‘insider mediators’ who are ‘intrinsic’ to the conflict context in question, but who do not belong to/identify with one or the other party (e.g. Mason 2009). Insider mediators might include national or local religious leaders, traditional authorities, or civil society organisations. In comparison to international actors, they may be better able to reach out to SJAGs by playing the role of societal ‘bridge-builders’, building on pre-existing links with their members such as kinship and shared religion/ideology (Haspeslagh and Yousuf 2015). In this research, four main types of third parties were identified based on existing experiences of external soft-power engagement with SJAGs.

☰ Humanitarian actors

Humanitarian organisations such as UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and INGOs (e.g. Doctors without Borders, Geneva Call) represent an initial array of third parties that frequently engage with NSAGs, including SJAGs. Their access to these groups varies across cases but they do operate in all contexts researched for this study. Local staff and agencies are most often those at the frontline of direct engagement, but international staff also negotiate directly with SJAGs on a regular basis – some agencies even claim to have daily interactions with members of ISIS or al-Qaeda-affiliated organisations (interview with humanitarian practitioner, November 2018). Highly respected humanitarian agencies such as the ICRC rely on their perceived neutrality, their reputation in other contexts where SJAGs are active (such as Afghanistan), their longstanding presence on the ground, and their local outreach through national and local staff, in order to ensure access. For example, “The ICRC works in all of Mali. All the parties to the conflict can do these actions mainly because the ICRC has an extremely wide network of interlocutors and a respect which is unique. It comes from the fact that the ICRC is really perceived as a neutral and independent entity but also because we have been active in Mali and especially in northern Mali since the 1990s” (Marti and Joli 2018). Practitioners also emphasise the importance of a clear strategy, comprehensive analysis and dedicated resources for successful interactions (Jackson 2014).

Humanitarian negotiations mostly occur at the local level, with regional commanders regulating access to aid agencies, especially during natural disasters or humanitarian emergencies. Indeed, individual group members play a central role in granting access to humanitarian organisations. For example, in the case of Mali, humanitarian workers in the region of Gao relied on ties created by a SJAG member who was a former trainee with the Malian Red Cross, who served as a gateway for accessing his group (Interview with Mali expert, January 2018). However, such individual interactions are also regulated by the group’s policies and attitudes towards external aid. In Somalia, international humanitarian agencies were often rejected by al-Shabaab, which released an edict during the 2011 famine “warning against accepting handouts from crusaders and apostates” (a reference to foreigners and the Somali government) (ICG 2017). One of the few organisations which managed a continued presence and aid delivery in al-Shabaab-controlled areas is the ICRC, which developed “*a common language, based in common norms of Sharia law and local customs, phrased neither religiously nor with reference to the Geneva Convention but as humanitarian principles of warfare that everybody can agree on, such as protection of children, non-acceptance of sexual violence, etc. This way, ICRC managed to move towards a principle-based relationship [with al-Shabaab].*” (Interview with ICRC representative, July 2018). Other aid organisations in Somalia agree that local commanders are essential as they tend to be more pragmatic than their leaders, and their conditions for allowing access are usually “*more fluid and open to interpretation*” (Sebastián and Claes 2016, 6; interview with humanitarian negotiator, November 2018).

International humanitarian agencies have also been able to gain access to Syria by negotiating with Ahrar al-Sham, whom they found “*very practical and pro-active in solving problems ... They also shared information openly and spoke English and the communication was easy. I felt they understood [our] mandate and weren’t political but cared only about the humanitarian situation.*” (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, August 2018). Ahrar al-Sham presents a particularity in the SJAGs we studied, because of its proactive interest in engaging with humanitarian actors, going as far as acting itself as a mediator between humanitarian agencies and other, more extreme, armed groups (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, November 2018).

≡ Societal bridge-builders

Local actors other than humanitarian staff may also play various third-party roles as bridge-builders or insider mediators; examples are tribal, traditional or religious figures, business professionals, local NGOs, or relatives of SJAG members. This type of engagement takes place locally where SJAGs are active, and access is granted thanks to interlocutors’ trustful and respected status, or kinship relations. SJAGs have been seeking support from the communities under their control and hence have engaged with local community representatives. One example is the only ceasefire agreement negotiated with al-Shabaab in Mogadishu in 2007, which was mediated by clan elders (Maruf and Joseph 2018). Informal connections to certain people within al-Shabaab through family, clan or business links are also used regularly in cases such as hostage release negotiations (Botha and Abdile 2019). The particularity of al-Shabaab is its spread throughout the country: “*Many Somalis have a relative who is an al-Shabaab member or sympathiser.*” (Interview with Somali civil society representative, February 2018). This supports the roles of family or clan members as bridge-builders to facilitate engagement with its members. Tribes and clans – and small communities in general – can act as a cross-cutting identity marker and thus foster forms of cooperation between SJAG members and the wider society. Indeed, shared (former) loyalties create access that can then be used by humanitarian or peacebuilding organisations. In the case of Mali, however, these actors have been targeted by counter-terrorism operations, mainly by the French military, signalling that they were not identified as impartial third parties but as ‘accomplices’ of SJAGs. This has severely reduced the number of individuals who may still be able to facilitate engagement with Malian figures within JNIM (Interview with Mali expert, April 2018).

At the national level, the role of religious authorities as bridge-builders for humanitarian or political engagement with SJAGs was also highlighted. A prominent example is the former leader of the highest religious authority in Mali (High Council of Islam in Mali – HCIM), Mahmoud Dicko, who has led several dialogue missions with SJAGs since 2012. His engagement included a visit to Gao when it was under the control of Ansar Dine in summer 2012 to negotiate humanitarian access; an alleged agreement with Ansar Dine leader Ag Ghaly to declare a ceasefire in October 2016 following months of secret negotiations, although it was quickly denied by the organisation;³ and a government-mandated attempt to engage in dialogue with SJAGs in 2017 to ease community tensions and convince them to engage politically with the government. His mandate ended unsuccessfully in early 2018, as Dicko had not been able to talk to SJAGs leaders, who refused to meet with him (Lebovich 2013, Thurston 2018).

Two cases of demobilised Islamist armed groups also illustrate the role of individual figures within civil society in engaging militants or facilitating access. In Egypt, various social interactions took place between imprisoned GI members and their co-detainees, especially secular intellectuals and human rights activists with whom they engaged in lively debates about Islamism, democracy and human rights (Ashour 2015). In Libya, a theologian, historian and opposition activist also acted as a mediator between the imprisoned leadership of the LIFG and the government (Ashour 2011).

3 See www.voanews.com/a/mali-dicko-ansar-dine/3576634.html

The role of societal bridge-builders in facilitating access to SJAGs has been less relevant in the case of Ahrar al-Sham in Syria, since the group is easily reached directly through its political bureau and public relations office and is engaged in constant interaction with society through its local militias. As one civil society actor from Idlib put it: “*We know all of them, their histories and families. This is unlike the situation with HTS or ISIS.*” (Interview with Syrian civil society actor, July 2018).

☰ Other armed actors

Other armed actors operating in the same spatial or ideological environment as the three SJAGs under study have also interacted with them through soft-power encounter for purposes of alliance-building, tactical bargaining or strategic negotiation, and could be hence considered an unconventional type of third-party actor. In Syria, for example, Ahrar al-Sham engaged with various armed actors to forge tactical alliances against the Assad regime. This was the case in 2012 and 2013, when it established the Syrian Islamic Front with other SJAGs in Syria, or negotiated coordinated action with the Free Syrian Army’s Supreme Military Council. Ahrar al-Sham also participated in informal dialogue formats, as working groups for NSAGs were set up to support and increase inclusivity and legitimacy for the main UN negotiations in Geneva in 2015. Cooperation between SJAGs and other NSAGs also took place in Mali at the onset of the conflict in 2012, when Ansar Dine and the MNLA worked together to conquer cities in the north, mainly in the Kidal region. While this relationship quickly deteriorated, inter-personal links between members of both groups (with fighters going from Ansar Dine to MNLA and vice versa) remained strong.

Although such instances of cooperation usually take place for the purpose of increased warfare efficiency, they can also potentially open avenues for further dialogue with other interlocutors. Despite the fact that al-Shabaab has had very little formal engagement with external actors in Somalia, an episode from the very beginning of the conflict indicates its leaders’ interest in cooperating with other Islamist (non-violent) forces at the time. Indeed, al-Shabaab’s first emir, Ismail Arale, was arrested in 2007 while travelling to a meeting with figures from the Islamic Courts Union (Maruf and Joseph 2018). This meeting aimed to form an opposition government, and thus shows the openness of al-Shabaab to political dialogue at the time. This engagement was short-lived, however, as subsequent emirs have consistently refused to participate in any form of dialogue since then.

☰ International diplomats and conflict resolution NGOs

Partly due to the international nature of Salafi jihadi claims, the great majority of contemporary conflicts involving SJAGs are characterised by heavy international intervention. This involvement mostly takes place through hard-power, highly militarised (e.g. counter-insurgency) strategies; consequently, there is little experience of dialogue attempts by international organisations and foreign governments so far. Given the fact that these groups themselves often view foreign troops, and the Western world in general, as an enemy to fight through their Salafi jihadi crusade, not all international actors may be depicted as ‘third parties’. But at the same time, the trend which emerged from interviews is that on the part of international agencies and Western governments, “*the principled ‘no’ to negotiations with Salafi jihadi armed groups is slowly fading away*” (Interview with mediation practitioner, February 2019). As they do not want to be seen to engage in dialogue with publicly shunned SJAGs, European or North American governments tend to mandate INGOs or professional mediators to initiate conversations on their behalf to explore the feasibility of negotiations. Several interviewees reported tentative attempts to engage SJAGs through such discreet dialogue channels in Somalia and Mali, which ultimately failed, either because the groups pulled out of the conversation or because other international actors that were engaged in counter-insurgency operations discredited these dialogue efforts (e.g. interviews with senior mediator and UN diplomat, May 2018).

Several foreign governments (also described in Section 2 as ‘sponsors’ or ‘patrons’ due to their alleged diplomatic or financial support) have engaged with SJAGs to incentivise their pro-negotiation stance. This was the case with Turkey and Qatar in Syria. The United States also engaged with Ahrar al-Sham in 2015, in parallel to Track II Geneva talks, and the group came to act as bridge-builder and messenger to more radical groups in Syria, with which the US could not engage directly (Interview with international diplomat, November 2018). Algeria also has a history of mediation in the Sahel and has played an influential role in engaging Ansar Dine and its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly prior to the Ouagadougou negotiations with the objective of separating the group from its Salafi jihadi allies, AQIM and MUJAO (Bouhleb 2020). It is unclear what leverage the Algerian authorities are still able to exert on the group, and whether they still have a communication channel to access its leaders.

In sum, the range of actors who have been engaging SJAGs in the three cases is wide, but context and circumstances affect their effectiveness and leverage on the groups (this topic will be further explored in Section 4). A common trait across all case studies was the key role of individual negotiators and bridge-builders (especially local) on the sides of both the SJAGs and third parties, relying on their expertise, trust, personality, kinship or personal history.

3.2 Purpose of engagement

Third-party engagement with NSAGs may be informal or formal, discreet or public, tactical or strategic. It can be motivated by a wide range of purposes and take various forms, including dialogue, negotiation, mediation, facilitation and capacity- building. With regard to the objectives pursued by third parties, various classifications have been offered. For instance, a study on NGO engagement with NSAGs classifies the goals of soft-power interactions according to the type of behavioural change that is pursued by the third parties (Hofmann and Schneckener 2011). On the one hand, what its authors call the ‘institutional approach’ focuses on the mechanism of bargaining, through mediation, negotiation, co-optation or integration. On the other hand, the ‘constructivist approach’ to engagement rests on the mechanism of persuasion, through processes of socialisation, naming and shaming, or reconciliation and transitional justice. Constructivist approaches are described as more sustaining, as “their ultimate aim is to persuade armed actors to accept, respect, and eventually internalize norms [of behaviour]” (ibid, 19).

In this research project, our initial approach to engagement with SJAGs rested on two main types of interactions (primarily through dialogue and negotiation): humanitarian approaches, which aim to provide access to needy populations, and to reduce the level of violence and suffering; and political approaches, which aim to pave the way for a conflict settlement, especially through a peace process. In addition, in the course of fieldwork we came across other types of engagement which will be described here as information gathering, religious debates, and (individual) defection incentivisation.

≡ Information gathering

Information gathering is a form of tactical engagement which can be used for intelligence purposes, but also for third parties (both practitioners and researchers) interested in better understanding what drives these groups and their members, and exploring prospects and appetites for dialogue on the part of their interlocutors, in order to prepare the ground for more strategic forms of engagement. In the Syrian conflict context, for example, UN military advisers have interacted with leaders of Syrian armed groups, including SJAGs, to gather data on conflict dynamics, operational data relating to convoys and troop movements, or breaches of ceasefires (Interview with international diplomat, November 2018). Another example of information gathering came from the research conducted by two INGOs (Life and Peace Institute and Finn

Church Aid) in Somalia, which included reaching out to mid-ranking members of al-Shabaab to interview them about their perceptions of the conflict, their objectives and their attitudes towards de-escalation options (Life and Peace Institute 2014; Botha and Abdile 2019). For instance, the more recent of these two studies, based on 17 such interviews, shows that there is willingness on al-Shabaab's part to pursue political dialogue, conditional, for example, on a withdrawal of foreign forces from Somalia, a general amnesty, the formation of inclusive Somali security forces and a new national government, the full implementation of Sharia law, and secure employment for al-Shabaab members. Even if they do not necessarily represent the top leadership's positions (which has proven the biggest stumbling block to a negotiated settlement), such data provides invaluable resources for third parties interested in exploring future negotiation options.

☰ Humanitarian engagement

As previously mentioned, humanitarian organisations are often at the front line of engagement with SJAGs. Their easiest and often most straightforward objective is to negotiate access to territories under SJAGs' control for the provision of humanitarian assistance to war-affected populations. These demands might also require some level of bargaining and concessions, such as the reliance on local staff exclusively, or adaptation to local religious and customary practices. An interviewee recalled the hostility of SJAG field commanders in Syria towards symbols used by humanitarian convoys (e.g. red cross) which they associated with the Christian faith and negated, in their eyes, their claimed impartiality. In order to be allowed to pass checkpoints, the aid workers were compelled to change vehicles and uniforms (Interview with humanitarian negotiator, November 2018).

Hostage release or prisoner exchange negotiations represent another type of humanitarian dialogue in which all three SJAGs under study took part, facilitated by local, national or international mediators. Interestingly, the founder and leader of Ansar Dine, Iyad Ag Ghaly, was himself employed by the Malian government as a hostage release negotiator during the 2000s, before his Islamist radicalisation. It can hence be assumed that his group was highly proficient in such dealings when it came to negotiating the fate of its prisoners. Since the creation of JNIM, however, dialogue on hostages seems to be taking place through the group's communication (video statements) focusing on justifying the non-release of hostages and also blaming France for the deteriorating health of hostage Sophie Pétronin (Altuna Galan 2018). While hostages continue to be released, this shows the influence of AQIM's "kidnapping industry" on JNIM (Altuna Galan 2018). More generally, it is hard to assess the effectiveness of such negotiations with SJAGs given the intentional secrecy under which they take place.

Humanitarian agencies such as the ICRC and Geneva Call also have a tradition of socialising NSAGs in the values and principles of IHL, notably through training activities. Among the SJAGs investigated here, to our knowledge Ahrar al-Sham was the only group which voluntarily sent some of its members to participate in IHL training programmes (Interview with Syrian civil society representative, August 2018). In a recent research report, the ICRC identified the importance of 'informal socialisation' in driving armed groups to restrain their behaviour, by depicting the influence of local social networks on the patterns of violence by decentralised non-state armed groups (ICRC 2018).

Cessation of hostilities represents another humanitarian aim, ranging from informal and temporary agreements to formal (unilateral or reciprocal) ceasefires. Such negotiations took place in all three countries, with varying results. While al-Shabaab in Somalia only engaged in one successful ceasefire negotiation in Mogadishu in 2007, interviewees reported instances of local 'tacit understandings' or non-aggression pacts reached between international or government forces and local al-Shabaab commanders. For its part, Ahrar al-Sham in Syria repeatedly adhered to unofficial ceasefires, while officially refusing to sign any agreements, for example the nationwide cessation of hostilities negotiated in December 2016 (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019). In Mali, Ansar Dine only agreed once to a ceasefire, prior to the Ouagadougou talks. It lasted two weeks around New Year in 2013 (AFP 2013).

It is important to note, finally, that several interviewees insisted on drawing a clear distinction between humanitarian and political engagement, and highlighted the risks of inferring any causality between them (e.g. by considering humanitarian actors as possible entry points for political dialogue), in terms of tarnishing the strict impartiality of humanitarian actors. Still, humanitarian agencies' experiences of negotiations and dialogue can offer interesting lessons for other third-party actors. Moreover, we assume that actors who experience regular and constructive engagement with humanitarian agencies might become more open to other forms of dialogue engagement based on these experiences.

≡ Religious debate

A few instances were recorded of third-party attempts to engage SJAGs in dialogue – or debate – on their Islamist ideological claims, with the objective of questioning their interpretation of Islam. As recalled by a European mediator mandated to approach al-Shabaab commanders on such terms: *“The dialogue attempts were supported by Islamic intellectuals and clerics from the Gulf states, and challenged al-Shabaab around themes such as: what is a believer, what is al-Shabaab’s interpretation of the Quran, what form of government do they seek, and the comparison between the Western and the Islamic ottoman forms of governance.”* (Interview with European diplomat, May 2018). However, this process was aborted, as al-Shabaab’s rather low level of religious literacy and knowledge, and their lack of scholars, made in-depth discussions on religious issues generally difficult. In addition, tensions within the movement made the hardliners increasingly hostile to any external contact, and the high level of fragmentation between different fronts throughout the country made it difficult to speak to one group without knowing if it was representing the movement as a whole (ibid.). Nevertheless, some observers continue to identify religious dialogue over issues of sharia, for example, as a credible entry point for negotiation by the Somali government. The argument here is that *“the constitution of Somalia already defines Islam as the state religion and sharia inspires the country’s national legislation. What is therefore in question is the interpretation of sharia, and this cannot be resolved through the use of force”* (Olojo 2019, 4).

In Mali, the instrument of Islamic jurisprudence as a source of dialogue had an unequal and evolving role. As of 2012, debates were held between scholars in north Mali on the legitimacy of jihad and the status of the nascent war. These debates involved jihadist groups as well as separatist groups and unaffiliated religious scholars – they were interrupted by the French military intervention. Later, and in particular in the centre of the country, religious leaders and scholars undertook voluntary initiatives to engage in discussions with the jihadist leader Amadou Kouffa on religious issues – for instance sending him contradictory arguments on the question of the use of violence in Islam. According to Bouhleb (2020), these debates remained limited or even deadlocked for two reasons: first, Islamic law was not fully assumed by the State as a means of deconstructing violence (as was previously attempted in Mauritania, see Bouhleb 2013); second, counter-arguments remained confined to purely doctrinal and/or theoretical questions and failed to analyse the political and contextual scope underlying the violence of these groups.

≡ Incentivising individual disengagement

In Section 2, we argued that comprehensive de-escalation is more effectively led by charismatic leaders with strong authority and internal legitimacy than by isolated soft-leaning moderates. By contrast, some experts on counter-terrorism promote engagement with moderates to encourage their defection and breakaway from SJAGs (e.g. Watts 2015), and negotiation specialists also believe that when dealing with ‘terrorist’ groups, engagement with moderates can have a tactical advantage by isolating radicals (Zartman and Alfredson 2010). In the same spirit, government-led or international CVE initiatives seek to incentivise individual disengagement by disenchanting members through defection and rehabilitation. Their impact

remains limited, however, as in Somalia, where the government initiated two such programmes, one for leaders (High-Level Defectors Programme) and one for low-ranking militants (Somali Defector Rehabilitation Programme). Several thousand defectors have already gone through these programmes since 2011, but they have been criticised for their shortcomings, such as a lack of protection for these former fighters from retaliation by al-Shabaab, or the failure to provide tangible opportunities and sustainable reintegration options (Felbab-Brown 2018, Van Zyl 2019). As argued by a UK conflict resolution expert, with regard to defections by high-ranking members in particular, their strength is that they “*demonstrate to a certain degree that there are senior members of al-Shabaab who are not crazy radicals, that we can talk to*”. But “[*t*]he risk is if you pull all the moderates out, you only leave the ideologues” (Harmonie Toros, cited in Houreld 2018). Indeed, these targeted defection programmes have increased scepticism among the group’s leadership towards any kind of talks, with the result that al-Shabaab is extremely suspicious of approaches to dialogue engagement with the formal hierarchy.

≡ Paving the way for a peace process

According to the authors of an edited volume on *Engaging Extremists*, political dialogue refers to efforts by third-party actors to make violent extremism movements open to negotiation by “inducing moderation and flexibility in their demands, reshaping their ends into attainable reforms, [or] forcing an end to their violent means of protest while, at the same time, opening the political process to broader participation” (Zartman and Faure 2011, 1). Political dialogue can also be used in early ‘talks about talks’, paving the way for formal (direct or mediated) negotiation. Furthermore, engagement for capacity-building purposes can help prepare effective peace negotiations by building these movements’ expertise in diplomatic affairs and other technical skills required for peace talks, and their understanding of the design, structure, process and pace of negotiations. As argued by an interviewee: “*One should negotiate with everyone as long as they are ready to stick to what they agree to. ... It is therefore very important for INGOs to provide training support for armed groups, including Islamist groups, to help them understand what negotiations are about, the give and takes, and the implications of commitments made at the table.*” (Interview with conflict resolution scholar, June 2018).

Across our case studies, the most comprehensive examples of third-party engagement towards a peace process took place in Syria, ranging from capacity-building support to informal Track II dialogue forums in Geneva on the margins of official negotiations, and participation in internationally sponsored negotiation rounds in Astana and Riyadh. Political dialogue also took place in Mali, when Algerian diplomats met with Ansar Dine leaders in 2012 to convince them to take part in formal negotiations in Burkina Faso (Bouhleb 2020). These goals were met, as Ansar Dine representatives then travelled to Ouagadougou to negotiate with the Malian government and the MNLA, although these talks proved to be short-lived, as reported earlier. Among the broader universe of former Islamist jihadi groups, two of them went all the way to direct negotiations with their respective governments, leading to formal bilateral agreements: the 1999 Civil Concord signed between the Algerian government and the FIS, and the 2016 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement between the government of Afghanistan and Hezb-e Islami. In both cases, the political will demonstrated by their leaders played a key role in inducing these peace processes, as shown in previous sections. In Section 6 below, we will explore future prospects for negotiated settlements with the three SJAGs studied as primary cases in this report.

3.3 Entry points for dialogue

Although all experts interviewed for this research project agree on the necessity to engage in dialogue with SJAGs, there is a wide spectrum of opinions on the conditions and entry points for such engagement, which we will summarise here in terms of **top-down vs. bottom-up strategies**.

In Somalia (currently) and Mali (during the period of parallel governance by SJAGs in major cities of the north), the only type of existing engagement has taken place locally, through SJAGs' constant interactions with the population as part of their governance activities and through local bridge-builders. In Somalia, third-party interactions to engage in religious debates with the group (as referred in Section 3.2) were initiated through private business circles that gravitate around al-Shabaab, before the circle was enlarged to reach out to combatants, and later commanders (Interview with international mediator, May 2018). A representative from a humanitarian organisation also explained that a bottom-up approach throughout the hierarchy of al-Shabaab was the most effective and pragmatic way of negotiating access, allowing humanitarian engagement to move from local, to regional, to central leaders (Interview, July 2018). The governance role of SJAGs on the ground, such as the provision of social services to the populations under their control, facilitates local engagement with humanitarian actors on the provision of food or healthcare. The primacy of local entry points for engagement may be explained by the decentralised nature of Ansar Dine and al-Shabaab: while the leaders are key and very important to the overall structure of the groups, local commanders play a major role in interacting with the population and hence, by extension, with third parties. Bottom-up strategies are risky, however, especially if decisions by regional commanders to allow humanitarian access or to engage in religious debates are not approved by the central leadership. In Mali, the lack of engagement by the leadership also means that informal understandings reached with local commanders were very unstable, as they relied on single individuals who were later posted elsewhere or eliminated by counter-terrorism operations (Interview with Mali expert, January 2018).

In Syria, the situation is very different. Up until its incapacitation (see below), Ahrar al-Sham was structured around a central leadership with a high level of coordination, and external engagement was therefore also rather centralised at the top. Besides local offices in towns and at the border crossing to Turkey, which Ahrar al-Sham controlled, the group had a political bureau in Istanbul. These offices served as easy entry points for bottom-up but also top-down dialogue efforts. One impediment was the rather low level of authority of the political representatives in Turkey to speak on behalf of the organisation's leadership in Syria, meaning that they acted as ambassadors rather than decision-makers (Interview with INGO representative, August 2018). Consequently, engagement with the political bureau might not necessarily be endorsed by the whole leadership.

As a meeting point between top-down and bottom-up approaches, or between pragmatists/moderates and ideologues/militarists within the group, one expert pointed to the *“strategic advantage of engaging those ‘in the middle’ between moderate and hardliner factions, as they can reach out to both and help to integrate them”* (Interview with negotiation expert, June 2018). One central point to keep in mind is that SJAGs, like all NSAGs, are plural actors, and should be considered in all their dimensions: military, social, charitable, religious and political. For example, their charitable or social branches might be more receptive to humanitarian dialogue conducted in accordance with the principles of neutrality and independence and hence act as an effective entry point for third-party engagement.

Now that we have described which third-party actors have engaged SJAGs in dialogue, for what purpose, and through which entry points, the next section will link these experiences back with de-escalatory trajectories, by examining whether the specificities of conflicts involving SJAGs act as inhibitors for dialogue engagement (for humanitarian or political purposes), and conversely, whether informal or formal engagement has any influence on conflict de-escalation, especially by altering SJAGs' organisational, ideological and behavioural dynamics.

4 Dialogue engagement: an obstacle or an opportunity for de-escalation?

In Section 2, we introduced the famous concept of ripeness for conflict resolution, which Zartman and others have described as a mutually-hurting stalemate (MHS), combined with a mutually-enticing opportunity (MEO) or a ‘way out’, which enhances the attractiveness of the negotiated option. Conflict resolution experts have explored various tactics to enhance conflict ripeness by motivating the conflict parties to develop an interest in negotiations, and to sustain the momentum (see Zartman 2000, Rubin 1991). A study on the ‘negotiability’ of armed groups (Lustenberger 2012) took these concepts further and applied them more specifically to NSAGs, developing a framework around MHS and MEO by depicting them respectively as ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors towards negotiation. On the one hand, push factors are shaped by material conditions on the ground (i.e. military, political and economic power dynamics), which create a situation of ‘hurting stalemate’ driving armed groups away from a military strategy. On the other hand, various pull factors may increase the prospect of a satisfactory negotiated agreement, by shaping these groups’ perception of a negotiated exit as a legitimate and achievable alternative to the violent struggle. “Without the perception of negotiations as a legitimate and achievable alternative, an armed group might suffer from a painful deadlock, but it has no viable alternative to the continuation of violence” (ibid., 7). Lustenberger disaggregates pull factors into three dimensions: the compatibility of the peace process with the worldviews and political objectives of the group, their confidence in the government, and their trust in the negotiation process. This proposed model is closely aligned with our own framework, especially as it puts a strong emphasis on intra-group processes as mediating the perception of negotiability, and also seeks to understand under what conditions “third party engagement may contribute to fostering the group’s view that ‘a time to talk’ has come” (ibid., 10).

This section is divided into two main segments. The first (4.1) looks at factors impeding engagement; the second (4.2) looks at the impact of engagement on (de-)escalatory dynamics within the groups. The main question addressed here is whether and under what conditions third-party engagement either follows (i.e. is conditioned by) SJAGs’ de-escalation, or precedes (i.e. contributes to) such de-escalation.

4.1 Challenges and obstacles hindering engagement

Notwithstanding the instances of third-party dialogue with SJAGs reviewed in Section 3, the track record of engagement with these actors through humanitarian dialogue, negotiation and mediation remains very thin overall. This can be explained by a range of challenges and obstacles, some of which can be attributed to the groups themselves, while governments and the international community also share part of the responsibility.

4.1.1 Challenges associated with the SJAGs

Past research on dialogue and negotiations with NSAGs has identified conducive factors for effective third-party engagement towards a peace process, such as the nature of the political claims made by such power contenders, the pragmatism and internal authority of their leadership, their ability to maintain internal cohesion, their degree of social legitimacy, or their self-limited use of violence ‘as a last resort’ (Ricigliano 2005, Dudouet 2009, Hofmann and Schneckener 2011, Zartman and Faure 2011). Based on this literature, Table 3 below summarises the main factors linked to the features of these actors which either constrain or facilitate dialogue engagement.

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Leadership	
Internal legitimacy	Contested authority
Structure	
Cohesive command and control apparatus	Fragmented organisation(s)
Territorial control	
Governance systems within held territory	No territorial base
Motivations and governance agenda	
Inclusive and democratic claims	Profit-seeking or anti-democratic goal
Social legitimacy	
Enjoys public support or a large constituency	Viewed primarily as a predatory force
Use of violence	
Self-limited violence ‘as a last resort’	Ruthless use of force

Table 3: Intra-group factors facilitating or constraining dialogue with armed groups (adapted from Conciliation Resources 2009)

At first glance, the stakes do not seem high for SJAGs, as they are typically described as actors holding maximalist and non-negotiable goals (e.g. rejecting the very nature of the Westphalian nation-state); who are perceived as a predatory or despotic force by the populations under their control; employ ruthless violence; and have little interest in political governance or even in gaining international legitimacy (e.g. Bellamy 2016). The detailed analysis of the internal features of three contemporary SJAGs in Section 2 offers some hints about the main obstacles hampering dialogue engagement.

≡ Organisational features

The structure of these groups represents a first challenge to engagement. Although we argued earlier (see Section 2) that de-escalation processes are more effective when initiated by charismatic **leaders** with high internal legitimacy, strong leaderships do not necessarily facilitate engagement with third parties, as we have seen with both al-Shabaab and Ansar Dine. Both groups are decentralised, but their central leaders

exert considerable power and are seen as the key to any meaningful engagement. Within Ansar Dine and the ‘Malian’ components of the JNIM coalition, Iyad Ag Ghaly remains the primary decision-maker. While the Conférence d’Entente Nationale identified both him and Ahmadou Kouffa as individuals to engage with by the government, Kouffa has pointed out that Iyad Ag Ghaly was the only legitimate person to talk to (Bouhleb 2020). Mid-rank individuals, although more accessible to external outreach, cannot act as entry points for collective engagement with the group.

Furthermore, a lack of **coherence** at the leadership level impedes decisive steps towards a peace process. In Syria, internal power struggles between ideologues and pragmatists preclude their participation in peace talks. Indeed, several windows of opportunity to be involved in political negotiations have been missed by the group, as leaders were under pressure to balance the various factions and did not have sufficient internal legitimacy to act as credible representatives of their organisation at the negotiations. In the Sahel, it is unclear what authority Ansar Dine leader Ag Ghaly really has within JNIM, and whether AQIM leaders would abide by any dialogue attempt on his part.

≡ Ideological features

In Section 2.5, we argued that a productive condition for critical junctures towards de-escalation – including soft-power dialogue engagement – was the decision by SJAG leaders to try out new strategies to achieve their objectives. However, these objectives, when formulated as inflexible, maximalist and anti-democratic end goals, might not leave room for compromise or bargaining. For example, SJAGs’ categorical rejection of Western and Christian ‘crusaders’ values represents a major obstacle for humanitarian as well as political engagement. This can be illustrated by the experience of Ahrar al-Sham fighters who took part in IHL training sessions run by a Syrian organisation. Although their participation showed at least a willingness to engage in a debate on their normative principles, difficulties were encountered when it came to convincing the trainees of the normative congruence between IHL and Islamic teachings. *“All groups in Syria agree that freedom is a right for all people irrespective of religion, but when it comes down to the right of apostates and how they should be treated, Islamists responded that they would kill apostates, as is legitimised in the Islamic writing. The discrepancies between the general freedom guaranteed for all in the Qur’an and not allowing that right for apostates as written in the Hadith made the discussion difficult. This problem was specific to Islamist groups. There was a lack of intellectual depth and they would accept only what is written, which is difficult if the writing is inconsistent or contradictory.”* (Interview with Syrian civil society representative, August 2018).

With regard to political negotiations, many interviewees cited the difficulty of pinning down a concrete set of negotiable demands by the groups. What would a (sufficiently) Islamic state look like, and who would be authorised to determine what is sufficient? How can a mutually acceptable model of governance and society be negotiated if concepts of multi-party democracy are firmly rejected? As a former member of Ahrar al-Sham pointed out: *“There is no coherent concept of an Islamic state; Islam provides a model, but no coherent structure on how things are to be accomplished to build a society with Muslim values”* (Interview, December 2018). The same argument can be applied to Somalia, a country which is already to a large extent what al-Shabaab wants it to be – ruled by Islamic laws. However, for al-Shabaab, parliamentary democracy (with elected representatives deciding on the constitution) is un-Islamic as only the Quranic tradition is relevant and not for mankind to judge or change. Furthermore, al-Shabaab has repeatedly pointed to the corruption, nepotism and ineffectiveness that discredit the Somali government. In fact, in some areas, al-Shabaab’s demands for ‘true’ Islamic rule mirror the Western precepts of ‘good governance’: low levels of corruption, responsibility and accountability – values that find support among most Somalis.

The fact that the contours of the Islamic state sought by SJAGs are so imprecise and indeterminate makes any negotiations difficult, because interlocutors are faced with vague claims to absolute truth, while there is no space for negotiation to formulate a mutually acceptable compromise. Negotiations

with SJAGs therefore have to factor in the need to clarify their negotiation agenda and political demands, and to transform them into concrete policy options. Yet the ideal state and society promoted by SJAGs put considerable strains on individual freedoms and especially on the rights of women and minorities. It should also be kept in mind that SJAGs do not represent the majority of the population, and their Islamist model of governance must also reflect the local political culture – for instance, it is not possible to erase the Somali clan system. Thus, the formulation of ‘win-win’ negotiated outcomes will necessarily entail a process of ‘de-extremisation’ (Aroua 2018) or adaptation to societal norms and realities, e.g. through an inclusive and representative process of national dialogue.

☰ Behavioural features

The ruthless and brutal use of violence and intimidation by SJAGs against their perceived enemies as well as their own members and social constituencies also acts as a moral barrier to dialogue engagement with their members. In Mali, for instance, the escalatory dynamics of JNIM since 2017, combining its geographical expansion and the ‘extremisation’ of its mode of action (e.g. increased targeting of civilians), seriously impedes opportunities for engagement. In the wake of its alliance with other al-Qaeda affiliates and its behavioural escalation, Ansar Dine started to be seen as having ‘crossed a line’, thereby closing the door on dialogue. Similar patterns can be observed for Somalia, where al-Shabaab escalated its violence from late 2009 onward and increasingly also targeted Somali nationals as an expression of resistance to the newly formed government under Islamist President Sheik Sharif.

4.1.2 Challenges associated with the government

Dialogue requires willingness and capacity to engage on both sides of the conflict divide, so challenges on the side of the government must also be considered. As argued by Lounsberg and Cook (2011, cited in Lustenberger 2012, 23), “while the armed groups must consider cooperation in line with their worldview, they must also sense that the government is willing to negotiate in good faith and has the capacity to implement a possible agreement”.

The framing and labelling of SJAGs as ‘terrorists’ or ‘violent extremists’ are a significant deterrent to dialogue engagement, which severely constrains governmental options in dealing with insurgents. In the context of counter-terrorism, SJAGs are vilified and presented as the enemy: us against them. This polarisation makes it harder for governments to open up to the idea of soft-power dialogue, and to justify it publicly, especially when the population has been previously exposed to a ‘demonisation of the enemy’ (Haspelslagh and Dudouet 2015, Spector 2003). Opening the channel of communication with SJAGs could thus result in the government facing a backlash from its own political base, created by a perception that it is ‘conceding to terrorists’ by legitimising their demands. A complete change of narrative is therefore necessary for formal engagement to be legitimised by the broader public and international players.

On the other hand, state actors’ positions are also more complex and multi-faceted than they might at first appear. As highlighted by a conflict resolution expert, “*It is very common for governments to say ‘they will not talk to terrorists’, but to then establish secret channels of communication. This is normal politics, and there is no other way, especially given the public stance that needs to be taken towards groups that engage in barbarous practices (...). All governments establish such channels, even where they have simultaneous counter-terrorism operations*” (Interview, June 2018). Another interviewee conceded that “decision-makers don’t want to be seen to negotiate. But they know it is inevitable” (Interview with diplomat, May 2018).

To be seen as credible dialogue partners by SJAGs, governments also need to demonstrate their capacity and political will to commit to a negotiated process. However, as argued above, insurgents often perceive governments as incoherent, weak and illegitimate interlocutors. The Malian government’s stance

on the desirability of political dialogue with Ansar Dine leader Iyad Ag Ghaly is ever-evolving, which sends mixed signals to the group. In Somalia, the government is completely rejected by al-Shabaab, and the recent tentative offer by President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed to negotiate with al-Shabaab comes after a decade of firm refusal by the government to ‘talk to terrorists’ (Mahmood 2017).

Finally, governments sometimes misread the causes of armed conflict and underplay the political nature of SJAG insurgencies, leading to distorted analysis of conflict resolution pathways. In Mali, especially since the expansion of violence to the central regions of the country in 2017, Salafi jihadi violence is portrayed by politicians in the capital Bamako as stemming from inter-community tensions rather than being fuelled by long-standing grievances against the state. The need to engage SJAGs through political dialogue is thus undervalued; instead, there is an emphasis on local reconciliation efforts. However, as demonstrated by one of our case study reports (Bouhleb 2020), the limited scope of this tool for bottom-up pacification (widely used since the 1990s), the low involvement of the real agents of violence (by restricting dialogue to civil society actors), and the rejection of a frank and open dialogue with jihadist groups, have yielded weak results in the deconstruction of jihadist violence.

4.1.3 Challenges associated with international actors

The impediments to negotiating with ‘terrorists’ also apply to third-party mediators and other international actors intervening in conflicts waged by SJAGs, especially since the **war on terror paradigm** imposing a counter-terrorism lens on such conflicts. In Mali, France plays a key military role in the fight against Ansar Dine/JNIM through Operation Barkhane and has been openly rejecting engagement with its leaders, with the Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault stating: “How could one negotiate with the terrorists? It is a fight without ambiguity.” (Reuters 2017, cited in Thurston 2018, 14). French diplomats also repeatedly asked the Malian government to put an end to Mahmoud Dicko’s Mission of Good Offices, and strongly opposed the conclusions of the 2017 National Conference of Understanding which called for the state’s overture towards dialogue with SJAG leaders (Bouhleb 2020, see Section 6 below). This paradigm also imposes a ‘with us or against us’ position, with potential bridge-builders becoming a target of counter-terrorism. This has especially been the case in Mali: “*They are killed one after the other by Operation Barkhane, the intermediaries are in survival mode because of Barkhane and therefore all the work that they do in terms of paving the way for dialogue is put at risk*” (Interview with Mali expert, April 2018).

The challenge of justifying engagement with SJAGs in light of public opinion does not only present itself for the national governments of countries where they operate; it is also relevant to international diplomats. Several European interviewees noted the risks of engaging in dialogue with groups targeting foreign aid workers and tourists, or with groups that are seen as allies or backers of home-grown terrorists who carry out horrific attacks in Europe. Interestingly, a survey conducted in the UK, USA and Germany by the British NGO Conciliation Resources contradicts this view, showing that a majority of respondents would support their governments engaging with ‘proscribed terrorist organisations’ when this is presented as a strategy to promote peace (Conciliation Resources 2017).⁴

In Syria, the situation is very different for two main reasons. On the one hand, the government is not supported by the international community and plays a very different role than the Somali and Malian states due to the brutal war it is waging against its own population. On the other hand, the rise of ISIS and the efforts undertaken by Ahrar al-Sham to distinguish itself from that group have lent it a “good” reputation.

⁴ In this survey, support for UN engagement is stronger than for government engagement; the percentages are highest overall in the UK (especially Northern Ireland), followed by Germany and US; and support for ‘talking’ with terrorist groups scores higher than for ‘mediating between’ or ‘negotiating with’. Figures range from 68% (US support for government negotiation with proscribed terrorist groups) to 83% (UK support for UN talking with proscribed terrorist groups) (Conciliation Resources 2017, 12).

Internationally, the **global Salafi jihadi scene** poses an additional impediment to conflict de-escalation through dialogue and negotiation. Walter (2017) points to SJAGs' tendency to display an extreme ideology in order to attract a stronger support base, due to the 'outbidding' phenomenon in the global competition among Islamist actors (see Section 2.4). Such peer competition also limits the strategic options available for SJAG leaders, as it not only implies the need to out-perform rivals, but also offers a frame of social control in a highly connected global network of Islamist actors. A particular challenge for SJAGs is that the legitimacy they gain from religious arguments is fragile insofar as justifications for strategic decisions such as de-escalation can be easily contested and discredited by other Islamist actors. Leading scholars in the Salafi jihadi scene function as external sources of authority and SJAGs have little control over the religious rulings of such figures, who might refuse to legitimise a SJAG's decision to engage in dialogue and political negotiations (in contrast to earlier Islamist armed groups such as GI in Egypt, whose own spiritual leaders were able to justify the shift to peaceful politics).

4.2 Impact of engagement on SJAG's de-escalation pathways

Having demonstrated that engagement by/with SJAGs is hindered by unfavourable conditions within and outside of the group, we now reverse the argument by examining whether and to what extent engagement might influence these conditions. According to Lustenberger (2012, 30), 'negotiability' (when parties recognise political negotiations as the primary strategic option) should not be considered a precondition for engagement, and indeed, engagement with third parties might increase rebel groups' negotiability by pulling them into the logic of negotiations. However, he also warns that when the parties are not ready for it, "a peace process can do more harm than good. Even a well-intended engagement can lead to a splintering of groups, which in turn may lead to an increase in the use of violence" (ibid., 26-27).

Going back to the factors facilitating or impeding effective political engagement as listed in Table 3, it might thus be worth asking ourselves under what conditions dialogue itself might help enhance the ripeness for a negotiated settlement by inducing SJAGs to move over from the right column (negative indicators) to the left one (positive indicators). Indeed, how does the experience of dialogue and encounter with the non-Salafi 'other' affect SJAGs' ideological choices, organisational features and strategic options? Do they become socialised into accepting certain norms and rules of the game (Hofmann and Schneckener 2011, ICRC 2018)?

We found it extremely challenging to answer these questions in the three cases under study, as none of the three groups have yet reached a position of 'negotiability'. Instead, two of them – al-Shabaab and Ansar Dine/JNIM – belong to the category of 'militancy', perceiving violence as the only option and rejecting any form of cooperative engagement with their opponent. The third group, Ahrar al-Sham, holds a mixed position, believing in the primacy of armed action but engaging in cooperative behaviour for various tactical reasons (especially under international and inter-group pressure).⁵ Does this mean that past experiences of (humanitarian or political) dialogue with these groups have had little effect so far? Breaking down the impact of engagement around the organisational, ideological and behavioural features of SJAGs, we found indications that it can have both a positive and a negative effect on the prospect of de-escalation through negotiated settlement.

5 These categories are drawn from McCartney 2005, cited in Lustenberger 2012.

☰ Impact on organisational features

Starting at the organisational level of the three groups under study, engagement seems to have had negative effects on the **internal legitimacy of their leaders**. Leaders engaging in dialogue with external audiences, especially international diplomatic circles, may be perceived by local commanders as being disconnected from realities on the ground, as was the case for Ahrar al-Sham. Indeed, the disconnect between the group's political bureau in Istanbul and the military leadership inside Syria widened as a result of the former's engagement with the West (Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019). Their mingling with the "5-star hotel crowd" was viewed with strong scepticism by their base (Interview with an international diplomat, November 2018). Moreover, their approval of political negotiations (even if they did not attend any of the Track I talks themselves until very late) discredited them in the eyes of the more hard-line rejectionists and/or militarists, which opened them up to eventual out-flanking and sidelining by more radical groups.

Our three case studies also revealed the effects of engagement on the cohesiveness of SJAGs' **command and control apparatus**. On the one hand, dialogue encounters initiated by individual group members can lead to increasing suspicion along the lines of command. This is especially the case for al-Shabaab, which lost many leaders when they were lured into defection through targeted engagement. These experiences have increased the top leadership's fear of spies and traitors, deepening its mistrust and hostility towards any invitations to dialogue from the government and international actors. Despite the cracks which began to appear within the control apparatus due to high-level defections (including by founding member Mukhtar Robow), the command and control apparatus has remained very cohesive in its refusal to engage in any form of dialogue with its enemies.

Formal attempts to engage SJAG leaders through political negotiations can also lead to splits between factions that wish to pursue dialogue further and those opting to switch back to militarism. This was the case for Ansar Dine in Mali. After its leader Iyad Ag Ghaly decided to walk out of the Ouagadougou talks, disgruntled high-ranking members left the group. This split was also brought about by the losses sustained by Ansar Dine during the French military intervention, Operation Serval. In this case, engagement thus had contradictory consequences. On the one hand, part of the group split and engaged in de-escalation by shifting its behaviour and ideology and later signing a peace accord in Algiers with the Malian government, alongside other NSAGs and militias. On the other hand, the main faction of Ansar Dine which remained with Ag Ghaly engaged in a rebuilding of forces before entering a period of further escalation in 2015, which has not ended yet (Roetman, Migeon and Dudouet 2019).

☰ Impact on ideological features

With regard to the effects of dialogue encounters on the ideological moderation of SJAGs, our study brings to light nuanced distinctions between de-radicalisation and politicisation. On the one hand, as reviewed earlier, the influence of international – and especially Western – actors' dialogue with these groups (e.g. IHL training in Syria, theological debate in Somalia) was quite minimal, and did not lead them to reconsider their worldview and overall objectives. This observation confirms the prediction made by a conflict resolution expert that "*theory is clear about the fact that negotiation shouldn't be about changing [armed groups'] belief system but rather about incentivising them to alter their strategy, or their behaviour, in pursuit of their objectives*" (Interview, June 2018).

However, we found several examples of collective **politicisation** induced by SJAGs' engagement with international, national or local interlocutors. In other words, these encounters helped the groups to gain political capacity and experience, and perhaps to adapt their political aspirations accordingly. For example, in Syria, Ahrar al-Sham members developed their capacities to engage effectively in the political sphere through various dialogue experiences. According to a former member of Ahrar al-Sham, the group's engagement with its Turkish sponsor in 2014 influenced its positions towards outlining its intentions and

viewpoints in a Revolutionary Charter: “Turkey recommended [the drafting and signing of a Revolutionary Charter] because it understood the international discussion better. You don’t see yourself as outsiders might see you. They [Ahrar al-Sham’s leadership] didn’t realise that after all their losses and sacrifice they might be perceived as terrorists. They also had no capacity for diplomacy or to understand the international dynamic. Turkey provided that and pushed them on it.” (Interview, December 2018). Later Ahrar al-Sham – along with other armed opposition actors – was also engaged in efforts by the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HDC), a Swiss NGO, to support their political participation. According to the same source, this direct engagement support – which focused on “politically maturing the group” during 2015 and 2016 – was “meaningful and had some results. (...) [It] was ... effective because they provided training and meetings that helped shape the opinion of the group. They [the HDC] were enhancing the capabilities of the actors to properly understand the political realities and to get the tools to engage properly, to help to eventually get to a solution”. This dialogue engagement thus provided much-needed information and capacity-building for Ahrar al-Sham to advance its internal debate on strategies and options for further political engagement.

Previous instances of SJAG de-escalation in Libya and Egypt, as reported earlier, also illustrate how engagement with third parties can lead to internal debates, and in turn to reconsideration of ideological **content and means**. This was the case for the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), when discussions between imprisoned leaders and Libyan government envoys led to internal debates within the group and eventually to a shift away from violence. In Egypt, renowned pro-democracy activist and former political prisoner Dr Saad Eddine Ibrahim recalled his interactions with imprisoned leaders of GI and how this helped to socialise them to a new worldview (Ibrahim 2004, cited in Ashour 2015, 180). These leaders “were first interested in knowing why the international community was outraged by his detention, but not by the detention of thousands of Islamist suspects. These encounters led to debates about Islamism, democracy and human rights, which had an impact on the group’s subsequent de-radicalisation. The ideas expressed in the IG’s new literature, as well as the references cited, reflect those debates and show a strong presence of modernism and post-modernism, albeit recycled in an Islamist framework”. The imprisoned GI leaders’ call for non-violence in July 1997 marked a significant cognitive shift within the group. This shift was subsequently developed in more elaborate ideological revisions after 2001, in consultation with al-Azhar sheikhs (Rashwan 2009, 126-127).

☰ Impact on behavioural features

On the behavioural level, one indicator of change impacted by engagement is measured by the groups’ interactions with their social surroundings. It could be argued that local encounters with humanitarian actors and community leaders socialised SJAGs into transforming their **local governance practices**, such as their humanitarian action or their application of Sharia-based justice. Engagement can lead to increased social legitimacy for SJAGs, especially when their engagement with humanitarian actors leads to service delivery. Al-Shabaab, for example, used humanitarian aid delivery to increase its legitimacy with the local population (Göldner-Ebenthal 2019). In the case of Ahrar al-Sham, it was rather the threat of losing social legitimacy that pushed it to continuously engage with humanitarian actors: “The difference between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham lies in how much they come from the local population. For if they are closer to the people, the threat of stopping humanitarian action is more powerful.” (Interview with Syrian civil society representative, August 2018). In this case, it seems that a non-escalatory behaviour led to engagement, which itself led to the continuation of a non-escalatory behaviour. In Mali, as explained in Section 2.3, Ansar Dine’s engagement with local leaders such as Islamic judges in Gao induced the group to apply a less ruthless interpretation of Sharia than other SJAGs controlling other cities across northern Mali.

As for other indicators of violent de-escalation, we found only limited evidence linking external dialogue engagement with SJAGs with the reduction of violence and human rights abuses by these groups, with the exception of limited (local and short-lived) **ceasefires**. As argued in Section 2, instances of de-

escalation were more likely to have been caused by other internal and external factors. It could be argued, however, that violence reduction is intrinsically linked to the onset of peace processes and hence to SJAGs' negotiability. As demonstrated during the recent talks between the US government envoy and the Taliban leadership in Doha, and many other negotiation processes with NSAGs, insurgency groups are unlikely to de-escalate their violent tactics before, or even during, peace talks, as they feel pressured to signal their military strength in order to bargain for the best possible deal from the negotiations. SJAGs are no different; they therefore cannot be expected to reduce or end violence until getting firm indications that their political objectives will be achieved, or that they will be able to pursue them non-violently in a conducive political environment.

Overall, we found that dialogue can help SJAGs to better prepare for a negotiated way out of the conflict by reconsidering and refining 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 and escalatory dynamics. In turn, we found that the features of these groups, but also the reaction of government and international actors, can create serious impediments to dialogue. The next section will turn to the key question of SJAGs' 'uniqueness' by assessing whether these challenges and opportunities are specific to SJAGs, or if these groups have much more in common with other types of NSAGs than is commonly assumed.

5 SJAGs: a coherent and distinct type of non-state armed group?

As stated in introduction, civil wars involving SJAGs have been at the forefront of international attention throughout the past decade. According to a recent ICRC study, 40 per cent of states experiencing armed conflict in 2017 were confronting jihadi groups, and “the vast majority of all foreign interventions are currently against armed groups with a jihadist agenda” (ICRC 2018, 14). All approaches to ending these ongoing conflicts have failed so far, and the narrative that SJAGs are fundamentally different from other types of armed groups is employed to justify why no other options than a focus on hard-power military strategies are possible. Against this background, one of the goals of this study was to examine the assumed ‘otherness’ of SJAGs, and by doing so, to contribute to existing theories of civil war and conflict resolution with NSAGs. Our findings show that the features and patterns of SJAGs can be adequately captured by the existing body of knowledge on NSAGs, to the point that one can reasonably question the need and usefulness of thinking of SJAGs as a distinct type of actor. In this sub-section, we therefore set out to answer the question ‘how homogenous are SJAGs and how unique are they in comparison with other NSAGs?’

5.1 Similarities and differences among SJAGs

Policy assumptions on SJAGs often point to their perceived exceptionalism in view of their maximalist and non-negotiable goals, as they are seen as having either little interest in political governance or a totalitarian and ruthless approach to governance. They are assumed to coherently reject the Weberian model and accept only God’s sovereignty above any man-made laws or states that gain their legitimacy from the people they govern. As we have shown above, these assumptions do not match the more complex reality of our scrutinised cases. Furthermore, the perceived homogeneity of SJAGs, based mostly on their shared ideological roots, often in reference to the most extreme cases, dominates media depictions of these actors. However, when paying closer attention to them, significant divergences can be observed between the groups that we have labelled Salafi jihadi armed groups, which raises the question whether they are in fact homogeneous enough to present a distinct sub-type of NSAGs. The answer to this question has important conceptual implications, but also major practical consequences, in terms of formulating policies and programmes to put an end to their violent behaviour.

As an analytical tool, **typologies** are usually designed as a theory-building exercise and do not generally impact political choices directly. In the case of SJAGs, typologies and terminological choices strongly influence the policy world. In 2016, for example, Sam Heller wrote in a blog post: “It is surely a sign of the bizarre circumstance in which we find ourselves today that ‘What exactly is Ahrar al-Sham?’ has become a question of international political importance.” (Heller 2016). The question of what is Ahrar al-Sham – or more precisely: is Ahrar al-Sham a typical SJAG? – in turn raises the question of what is a ‘typical’ Salafi jihadi armed group in relation to other NSAGs. There are many existing typologies of non-state armed groups, a few of which are specifically concerned with Islamist actors. The SJAGs studied here do not neatly fit any category given their diverse and cross-cutting features.

For example, typologies often characterise SJAGs by their rejection of the Weberian nation-state model (Maher 2016, Hegghammer 2014). Two of our three cases, al-Shabaab and Ansar Dine/JNIM, may fit this description. Yet al-Shabaab’s actions in particular have remained highly focused on the Somali state and

hence tend to fit into the category of violent state challengers (Maher 2016), who do not reject the existing system completely but seek to change it, as does Ahrar al-Sham. Only in one typology do all three cases arguably match one single category: Zohar's typology (2016) cuts across the entire spectrum of NSAGs and identifies four categories according to their main political agenda: secessionist, social-revolutionary, sectarian-revolutionary and global-revolutionary. The latter category is very broadly defined and includes all actors upholding a globalist ideology. All of our cases fit this category. And yet Ansar Dine's origin lies in the secessionist category with a strong Tuareg identity. Ahrar al-Sham has very clearly stated its nationalist agenda so overall, it would fit better with the social-revolutionary category – yet the author narrowly restricts this category to leftist (Marxist and Maoist) armed movements. Within all-encompassing typologies that do not reference religion at all (e.g. Schneckener 2009), SJAGs cut across several categories by displaying a mix of rebel/guerrilla characteristics, criminal/mafia features and terrorist behaviour. Furthermore, typologies that focus specifically on SJAGs – distinguishing, for instance, between “cosmic” groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda and its affiliates, “other Islamist armed groups” and “strategic armed groups” (Jurgensmayer 2003) – have proven under closer scrutiny to obscure “a much messier, more complex reality” (Glazzard et al. 2018, 69).

As demonstrated throughout this report, our findings caution against the over-simplification of SJAGs and the tendency to lend them a degree of coherence and homogeneity which does not match reality. We therefore support findings from Glazzard et al. (2018, 14) that “the diversity of violent Islamist groups is important, as it suggests that [they] are the product of specific, local conditions more than they are manifestations of grand, global ideologies”.

5.2 Similarities and differences between SJAGs and other NSAGs

As argued at the start of this study, mainstream policy discourses on the Islamist threat tend to exceptionalise SJAGs as a unique phenomenon which differs fundamentally from any other form of political violence, especially due to their irrationality and their extreme ideology. This view emerged in the wake of the 9/11 era, as scholars began depicting 21st-century political violence as a “religious wave of terrorism” that came to be seen as dogmatic and less open to pragmatism and concessions than previous generations of anarchists, nationalists and revolutionaries (Rapoport 2004). Fettweis (2009) similarly pointed to the different value systems, mechanisms of legitimisation and justification, concepts of morality and worldviews of ‘ideological terrorists’, as he calls actors like al-Qaeda and those sharing their ideology, as compared to other NSAGs. Accordingly, “[n]ationalists often behave as rational actors facing extreme power asymmetry”, meaning that they “must act within a set of strategic limitations (...) if they are to avoid alienating wider society. (...) Ideological terrorists, on the other hand, do not seem to be constrained by such rational strategic limitation” (Fettweis 2009, 280f). These unique traits, assumed to be specific to SJAGs, are also seen as major obstacles to negotiated settlements: “Conflict resolution with religionist rebels is difficult because they eschew negotiation. Faith and divine responsibility cannot be negotiated away, and other actors are viewed as illegitimate negotiating partners if they do not subscribe to the same beliefs.” (Fazal 2018, 32).

Several recently published articles challenge the myth around the specificity of SJAGs. Kalyvas (2018, 39) argues that “in many ways, jihadi rebel groups come across as rather undistinctive when compared with other rebel groups”. With regard to their **ideology**, for instance, “[i]t makes a lot of sense to think of jihadi rebel groups as parts of a global, revolutionary wave. This is precisely where an exclusive focus on matters of religion and faith can prove restrictive insofar as it might point us to less than productive comparisons. Indeed, jihadi rebel groups share many similarities with their predecessor in the history of transnational revolutionary movements: namely, the Marxist rebel groups of the Cold War era” (ibid, 42). Munson (2016) also questions the centrality of ideology as a defining feature of Islamist armed groups which sets them

apart from other NSAGs: “The ideology of terrorist groups is also often malleable and changing, making it a poor basis for classifying groups or accounting for their dynamics. This is particularly true when it comes to organizational goals. Let me use al-Qaeda to illustrate this point. In 1988 its focus was to take control of Afghanistan; in 1992 it was to kill U.S. soldiers in Arabia and the Horn of Africa; in 1996 it was to free Muslims around the world; in 1998 it was to kill Americans worldwide; in 2001 it was to free Palestine. Other well-known groups, including ... the PKK [*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*] in Turkey, ETA [*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*] in Spain, and the Shining Path in Peru have similarly changed their ideological goals.”

Such similarities in the strategic or cognitive evolutions of SJAGs and other NSAGs were corroborated in expert interviews. As a senior mediator argued, in Northern Ireland the Irish Republican Army (IRA) “*was in a state of denial at first, asking for ‘Brits out’, before engaging in an internal debate on what they really wanted. The same happened with ETA. Similarly, the Taliban want ‘Americans out’ – but have no clue about their objectives beyond that. IS and al-Qaeda have similar trajectories but are in earlier stages of the curve*”. For SJAGs, as for other NSAGs, it seems that as long as the groups do not determine their demands for themselves, negotiations are not possible: “*If they have no demands, what is there to negotiate?*” (Interview, February 2019). A gradual turn toward pragmatism and politicisation is hence assessed as a shared necessity for all NSAGs, not a particularity of SJAGs. This adaptability also implies that “religion in general and Islamism in particular do not make violent groups automatically intractable. They should not, therefore, be excluded from the negotiating table just because they are Islamists who use violence.” (Glazzard et al. 2018, 82). Furthermore, as was also shown in this research, SJAGs are often primarily concerned with practical matters that affect their daily lives and those of their (claimed) constituencies. “*Initial dialogue concerns transactional deals on issues around clan disputes, social justice, land, participation, etc., rather than a debate on ideology and claims to absolute truth.*” (Interview with mediation expert, February 2019). And yet instead of seizing opportunities for engagement around socio-economic agendas or popular grievances, dominant perceptions of these groups focus on the most virulent dimensions of their ideology, which precludes the possibility for dialogue. As a humanitarian actor pointed out in the case of al-Shabaab, “*we frame al-Shabaab so clearly that talking to them becomes impossible*” (Interview, May 2018). This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews, where the main difference between SJAGs and other NSAGs was attributed to public perceptions about these groups. Accordingly, “*what matters is not how different they are, but how different we perceive them to be*” (Interview with mediation expert, February 2019). While de-radicalisation is often portrayed as a precondition for negotiations with SJAGs, “*we never requested from the IRA that they give up their historical claims. The negotiations were not about ideology, but around ending violence*” (ibid.). Another assumed distinction lies in SJAGs’ presumed irrationality and limited strategic thinking (as quoted above). By contrast, throughout our fieldwork we identified instances of negotiations with SJAG leaders or field commanders where they clearly acted rationally and could be trusted to abide by their commitments – in the case of Ahrar al-Sham, even more so than the non-Islamist Free Syrian Army (Interview with humanitarian practitioner, August 2018). Glazzard et al. (2018, 66) point out: “Although frequently portrayed in the West as barbaric, pathological and apocalyptic, ISIL should be seen as a supremely rational actor that recognises the political and military benefits that can come from removing cultural and ethical constraints in the application of violence.”

In terms of **behavioural patterns**, one may also argue that while the technological revolution brought by the emergence of the Internet and social media have brought to the fore the gruesome acts of extreme violence committed by SJAGs, “there is nothing uniquely Islamic (or even jihadist) about such violence. Similar practices have been used by a variety of insurgent (and also incumbent) actors in civil wars. Likewise, terrorism is not exclusive to jihadi groups” (Kalyvas 2018, 41). As argued in a study comparing Islamist and non-Islamist NSAGs in Syria/Iraq, Nigeria and Kenya, “the history of Islamist militancy since 9/11 demonstrates a relative lack of novel techniques including in comparison to other violent groups. With the exception of the planning and scale of financing required for Al Shabaab’s 2013 Westgate mall attack, most attacks by Al Shabaab and affiliates in Kenya have been similar to those conducted by non-Islamist actors in their use of small arms, grenades and small IEDs” (Glazzard et al. 2017). Among our primary case

studies, SJAGs in Syria and Mali operate alongside a multitude of other NSAGs, from separatist secular groups (e.g. MNLA in Mali) to revolutionary/nationalist groups (e.g. Free Syria Army in Syria) and pro-state militias. While we could not find sufficiently reliable sources to compare the violent means employed by all these groups, we can at least state that IHL violations and gruesome killings were performed by all NSAGs across the spectrum – judging for instance by the brutal massacres of civilians committed by local militias in central Mali in recent months.

In terms of their **structural features**, SJAGs (especially those affiliated to al-Qaeda) are often depicted as network-based organisations, with fragmented self-governing cells and weak connections to local people (e.g. Bellamy 2016). These traits did not match the findings. While decentralised, all three observed SJAGs have a clear and strong command and control structure, and have displayed not only the will to gain and hold territory but also the capacity to perform extensive governance functions, often in close interaction with the local population. Furthermore, the groups showed responsiveness to their social constituencies in a relationship that is typical for other NSAGs. Indeed, all three groups under study are deeply embedded locally and very much described as local indigenous actors, whose governance claims are primarily domestic and rational in the sense of aiming to take over state power and establishing an Islamist regime – not the utopian idea of establishing a global caliphate. Their sources of support and recruitment do not seem to diverge much from other NSAGs, as they draw popular support by capitalising on structural grievances such as marginalisation, economic deprivation and the absence of, or mismanagement by, the state. Ansar Dine, for example, has relied on its Tuareg-Malian identity to gain popular support. This is also the case for its ally Katiba Macina in central Mali, which has relied on its Fulani-Malian identity to recruit fighters and gain some public support, much as al-Shabaab has drawn on its local ties. These findings support Kalyvas' statement that “[i]deology is a flexible political tool even for jihadi groups, and it is common for them to tailor their ideological messages to the particular circumstances they find themselves in. Despite their utopian claims, including the creation of a caliphate and the abolition of national boundaries, they often rely on nationalist and particularistic messages tailored to win popular support” (Kalyvas 2018, 39).

However, other authors point to specific traits which might explain the lower prospects for negotiated conflict settlements with SJAGs than with other NSAGs. According to Fazal (2018), the fact that SJAGs categorically reject the Westphalian state model and its representatives as illegitimate makes their engagement in political negotiations unlikely. As reported in Section 4, several interviewees also pointed out that these actors' hostility towards external third parties as unbelievers or 'crusaders' can present a real challenge for any dialogue attempts. Yet rather than ruling out the prospect for negotiations, these challenges underscore the need to adopt specific approaches to dialogue through **credible interlocutors**. Local communities can seize any opportunities that arise to support a reduction of violence, for instance in the face of 'moral shock' caused by a particularly violent act, as in Somalia after al-Shabaab killed more than 500 civilians in one bombing attack in October 2017. When the government's call for a reduction of violence is ignored, the voices of significant segments of society are harder to ignore when SJAGs build much of their arguments on a claim of moral superiority.

With regard to SJAGs' **transnational features**, several authors note that their ability to attract foreign fighters is certainly not a recent phenomenon, nor is it by any means confined to Islamists (e.g. Malet 2013). However, one major difference from other revolutionary armed groups might be their lack of external state sponsorship, contrasting with the support offered to Marxist NSAGs by the communist superpower during the Cold War, for instance. According to Kalyvas (2018, 44), this distinction may be a primary reason why “civil wars entailing jihadi groups are much less likely to be settled via negotiations ... [than through] the military defeat of the rebels”. SJAGs' transnational identity, connections and ideological roots are also associated with a high level of **competition among Islamist armed contenders within the global Salafi jihadi scene**, leading to the 'outbidding' phenomenon described earlier. SJAGs act and define themselves within that scene, which is highly interconnected thanks to the rise of modern communications. One could argue that other NSAGs are also prone to infighting with their peers (externally) or members (internally) over interpretations of doctrine. An interviewed practitioner with experience across the MENA region and Latin

America pointed out the similarities across various NSAGs (from Islamists to Marxist-inspired guerrillas and nationalist groups such as the PKK) in terms of the dogmatism that leads to frequent infighting and splits in the early years, before they become more pragmatic with the passage of time. But in comparison, SJAGs seem stuck in a non-compromising stance due to the orthodoxy of the global Salafi jihadi scene. This feature has particular ramifications for their de-escalation. When deciding to give negotiation a chance, they will need to legitimise their divergence from the accepted norm of rejecting political engagement, and risk provoking dissension and incoherence within the group. For instance, Ahrar al-Sham leader Omar released a one-hour video in which he defended the group's pragmatic approach of political engagement and restricted focus on Syria, and promoted Ahrar al-Sham to the broader Salafi jihadi scene as a new school of militant Islamism (Heller 2016).

The requirement for SJAGs to argue for, and justify, a potential strategic shift towards negotiations is also a result of strong narratives in the Salafi jihadi scene, such as the 'slippery slope' that warns against engagement in politics as it is supposed to lead inevitably to a divergence from the 'true' path. SJAGs thus constantly rely on the approval of their peers and the religious rulings of often external figures. Competition and social control tend to favour sustained dogmatism and violence for these groups to retain their relevance, credibility, funding and attractiveness for recruiting new fighters. In fact, SJAGs have to administer to a double – and not necessarily overlapping – set of constituencies: their Salafi jihadi (national and internationalised) supporters, on the one hand, and the local population supporting them for political (e.g. nationalist) or socio-economic (i.e. marginalisation) reasons, on the other. If the demands of these constituents are at cross-purposes, as was the case during the Ouagadougou talks in Mali and during the famine in Somalia in 2011, for example, this can affect the group's internal dynamics. Accordingly, SJAGs might be more prone than other NSAGs to internal splits in a situation of direct competition from a (more radical) Islamist rival, as in Syria, or if the interests of the constituencies collide. Many other NSAGs do face such competition – as seen in Colombia where segments of the FARC guerrillas have been rearming for fear of their competitor (ELN) taking in all their disgruntled ex-fighters; however, SJAGs tend to have a greater number of competitors.

Finally, a former Ahrar al-Sham member in Syria pointed to another unique characteristic of SJAGs which seriously impedes their de-escalatory prospects, namely, the **lack of positive precedents** of SJAGs having succeeded in achieving their goals through political negotiations (Interview December 2018). Accordingly, this does not make negotiations an attractive option for them as they have no domestic or international models to look up to. He pointed out that instances of de-radicalisation in Egypt and Algeria are not perceived as positive examples as the groups concerned have no power today, there is no justice in these countries and the state is not ruled by Islamic precepts – hence they have failed to achieve their mission. The same interlocutor did not rate the negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and Hezb-e Islami as a success either, arguing that its historical leader Hekmatyar had become a mere mercenary, discrediting his religious credentials. It remains to be seen if the ongoing negotiation attempts with the Taliban provide a more effective role model for other Islamist insurgencies.

To sum up, the difference between SJAGs are more pronounced than is often assumed, reducing the usefulness of approaching these actors through a common frame; their distinctions from other NSAGs are also not as clear or as pronounced as might appear at first. In other words, we found that far from a uniform category, there appear to be more differences among SJAGs than between SJAGs and other types of NSAGs.

What does this mean for SJAG's de-escalation? Across all three cases, virtually all interviewees agreed that it is time to engage with the groups, regardless (or perhaps because of?) their ruthless use of violence and their allegedly extremist ideology. Engagement is seen as necessary (alongside the use of force) because military might does not suffice to defeat SJAGs and because policy-makers are finally coming to the realisation that "*political conflicts require political solutions*" (Interview with Islamism scholar, November 2018). However, as we have pointed out above, the SJAGs' perceived 'otherness' has so far remained a moral or strategic barrier to dialogue engagement, when instead the most effective way forward might be to determine the 'ripe' moment for conflict resolution. Yet particularities such as inter-SJAG competition and

a rejection of any Western interveners, which are to varying degrees shared features of SJAGs, pose severe challenges to established approaches to dialogue engagement. Building on our review of past attempts to negotiate on humanitarian, religious or political issues with these groups (see Section 4), we will now conclude our analysis with final thoughts on future de-escalation trends and predictions based on the dynamics observed so far and analysed at length in this report.

6 Synthesis and outlook

With this research report, we have set out to scrutinise the (de-)escalation pathways of SJAGs (Section 2), the existing experience with – or possible entry points for – third-party dialogue engagement (Section 3), the mutual influences between third-party engagement and conflict de-escalation (Section 4), and the comparative features between SJAGs and other NSAGs (Section 5). In this last section, we turn to a brief exploration of future trends and prospects for conflict termination in the three case studies under review.

The three-dimensional model presented in Section 2 provides a useful framework to delve into future de-escalation options. As a brief reminder, Matesan (2016) identified three pathways for the de-escalation of SJAGs: incapacitation, adaptation and disillusionment (see Table 1 in Section 2). When we embarked upon this research project, none of the three SJAGs under scrutiny had de-escalated beyond ‘cell A’, in the sense that they still engaged in violence, justified its use, and had a fully functional armed faction. We therefore used the framework to try and identify the most plausible de-escalation pathways through a scenario-building exercise. Using Matesan’s model as a reference point during our expert interviews, we asked interlocutors to indicate which scenario they saw as most likely in the future, and which conditions were necessary for it to be realised. Individual scenarios are described at greater length in the case study reports (Göldner-Ebenthal 2019, Göldner-Ebenthal and Elsayed 2019, Roetman, Migeon, Dudouet 2019, Bouhlel 2020); we therefore confine ourselves here to a few general observations.

Disillusionment (path 3) was described by Matesan as a complete de-escalation driven by leaders re-evaluating the importance, necessity and legitimacy of violence, and transmitting the new doctrine and strategy to members throughout the chain of command. In none of the three cases was this scenario considered as a plausible option, in spite of strong repressive military strategies used by the governments and international actors. This could point to a lack – or insufficient levels – of internal pressure to adopt a new approach favouring a non-violent strategy. Alternatively, too frequent leadership changes could have negatively affected the personal learning/reflection process for leaders, preventing them from reaching the point of disillusionment. In the case of al-Shabaab, it might also be a result of the high internal surveillance and repression of critical voices. It could also be the case that despite the high costs of the repression which SJAGs face, the status quo offers more benefits, such as territorial control and steady income generation or trafficking.

Incapacitation (path 1), in turn, refers to demilitarisation and demobilisation caused by a lack of capacity rather than a shift in ideological conviction. This scenario has been pursued for several years by the governments and their international allies in all three countries. In the cases of Ansar Dine and al-Shabaab, however, most interviewees did not consider it a likely path to success, as the state’s military capacity was not judged to be sufficient to defeat the group, and in their areas of control, a large segment of the population views the presence of international forces with resentment. Furthermore, interviewees asserted that the root causes of the conflict cannot be solved solely through military force. Ahrar al-Sham, on the other hand, as of February 2019, became essentially incapacitated. It is noteworthy that this pathway was mainly pushed through by rebel competition, not by state repression – Ahrar al-Sham was outflanked by a more radical Salafi jihadi competitor.

As a more indirect form of incapacitation, many interlocutors mentioned the scenario of rendering these groups irrelevant: by addressing the root causes of the conflict, governments may cause SJAGs to lose the bases on which they mobilise and recruit members and supporters. In Somalia and Mali, dialogue engagement is not seen as the main or only solution for conflict de-escalation and the provision of human security. Instead, support for good governance, fair resource distribution, the disbanding of militias, and other measures to address the basic grievances of the population in deprived areas where SJAGs

flourish are seen as equally important courses of action. As one expert put it: *“If you listen to the people, the conditions for jihadi groups to emerge are reduced. If you change the conditions, their message will not resonate.”* (Interview with Islamism expert, November 2018). Such measures will not make the dialogue option necessarily more attractive for these groups but will decrease their sources of recruitment, and hence affect their overall balance of power with the state. This argument was also made in the context of SJAGs in the Levant: *“Addressing some of the manifold problems of governance in [Syria and Iraq] would not bring ISIL and Jabhat al Nusra to the negotiating table but would diminish their support among the disenfranchised Sunni Arabs”* (Glazzard et al. 2017). While effective, indirect approaches to making SJAGs obsolete by cutting off their sources of attractiveness represent a long-term strategy and require sufficient capacity on the part of state institutions to significantly change socio-economic conditions on the ground.

Finally, **adaptation** (path 2) refers to a group’s strategic decision to give up violent tactics, while keeping their ideology intact and retaining organisational capacity to conduct armed operations. Many interviewees gave strong credence to this scenario for the cases of al-Shabaab and Ansar Dine, while some went further by expressing their preference for formal negotiations through a peace process, with the hope that the groups would eventually reach Cell F by dismantling their armed wing and entering some form of power-sharing agreement. The topic is more openly discussed in Mali, as Ansar Dine has already participated (albeit briefly) in past negotiations and unofficial communication channels have been created on various occasions between the group and the government. In contrast to groups which are predominantly composed of foreign fighters such as AQIM, Ansar Dine and its ally Katiba Macina are often depicted as ‘sons of the nation’, whose demands are confined within the framework of the state, to justify calls for political engagement with their leaders (Bouhleb 2020). In 2017, the Conference of National Understanding recommended that to resolve the current crisis, it is necessary to *“negotiate with religious extremists in the north, including Iyad Ag Ghaly (and Ahmadou Kouffa), while preserving the secular nature of the state”* (Conférence d’Entente Nationale 2017). Dialogue has also been identified by analysts and experts as a way to get out of the ‘impasse’ of the war: for example, a recent report by the International Crisis Group (2019) explicitly recommends the exploration of dialogue opportunities with one of those groups, namely Katiba Macina. Even the French position is slowly evolving: as indicated by Bouhleb (2020), interviewed French officials voiced their support for ‘bottom-up’ dialogue with young combatants to encourage their demobilisation. However, they remain firmly opposed to political engagement with their top leaders.

For al-Shabaab, negotiations were a taboo for a long time but there is a growing openness in Somalia and among international actors to consider a negotiated scenario (Ahmed Ali 2017, Kelley 2017, Ingiriis 2018, Olojo 2019). On the first anniversary of the country’s deadliest attack by al-Shabaab in October 2017, Somalia’s former national security adviser took a clear stance in favour of dialogue: *“We must set the stage for talks. It is imperative that the Somali government has a good communications strategy as news of the negotiations becomes public. Somalis on both sides have experienced atrocities and trauma, and the absence of justice and accountability has sowed further grievances. The peace dividend that can be gained, however, has no price. The government must deliver and articulate this to the public.”* (Sheikh-Ali 2018). International voices have also started to call for a new approach, as articulated by Crouch and Mackenzie (2019): *“Has the time come to discuss whether exploring dialogue with al-Shabaab could succeed where the drones and bombs have not? The group’s attacks on civilians and its allegiance to al-Qaeda have made it a notorious pariah and an unpalatable negotiating partner. But we found that Somali policymakers and ordinary people have stopped believing that military victory is possible and have a strong appetite for negotiation.”* A mediation expert offered a similar argument in relation to the call for talks with ‘domestic’ insurgents in Mali: *“with al-Shabaab, the entry point should be to talk to the nationalists (those with a national agenda), combined with a campaign from the inside to support one leader over another”* (Interview, February 2019).

For both Ansar Dine and al-Shabaab, the particular difficulties around negotiations are manifold. Both of the governments concerned need to adopt a more unified position on the prospect for dialogue. *“Divided views, mistrust and the dearth of political will within governments would need to be overcome*

in order to achieve the level of cohesion required to engage with ... al-Shabaab [and JNIM/Ansar Dine],” as argued by a security analyst (Olojo 2019, 8). Another commonality is the need for both groups to dissociate themselves formally from al-Qaeda in order to enhance political will among international players to support negotiations. The Syrian SJAG Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS; formerly the al-Nusra Front) did follow this course of action, officially breaking ties with al-Qaeda in 2016 and confirming this ‘divorce’ in 2017. Yet such efforts tend to be interpreted by their enemies as a tactical move rather than a comprehensive strategic shift, and this process needs time and strong leadership in order to pay off. Despite the many challenges that negotiations would entail, a glance at Afghanistan shows that they are not insurmountable if the right internal factors and a conducive environment are in place.

Beyond the negotiations themselves as the locus for bargaining and decision-making on contentious conflict issues, comprehensive de-escalation entails a broader set of challenges – including the demilitarisation, dismantling and disbanding of military structures, and their transformation into democratic entities such as political parties, community-based organisations or social movements (Dudouet 2015, Ashour 2015). Across all three pathways (adaptation with negotiations, disillusionment or incapacitation), facilitating the transition to non-violent politics should be considered a priority, in order to prevent a future relapse into conflict. As research has shown through documented cases of political transition in Tunisia, Egypt and Indonesia (Ashour 2009, 2015, Al-Hashimi and Goerzig 2011, Drevon 2015, Matesan 2016), SJAGs can and do transform to peaceful political activism. It is our contention that the growth of Islamist (including Salafi) political parties since the Arab revolutions represents a significant window of opportunity for jihadi groups to reconsider the strategic and legitimate superiority of violent strategies to advance their revolutionary political goals (Bitter and Frazen 2016, Aroua 2018, Kalyvas 2018). Accordingly, with a look towards the future, we need to consider not only the opportunities for negotiated settlements but also the transformation implied for the groups in order to enhance stabilisation and sustainable peace.

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