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Expert Roundtable on Salafi jihadi armed groups: De-escalation trajectories and dialogue engagement

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Workshop

Report

Abstract

On December 11, 2019, the Berghof Foundation hosted a confidential expert workshop on "Salafi jihadi armed groups – (De)escalation trajectories and dialogue engagement", with funding and support by the German Foundation for Peace Research and the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. This workshop aimed to discuss findings and policy implications from a two-year research project based on in-depth interviews with experts and practitioners in/on Mali, Syria and Somalia. It also offered a space for peer-exchange and mutual learning between organisations active in the field of dialogue engagement with Salafi-jihadi armed groups, including governments, international organisations and INGOs. Discussions addressed questions such as: What are specific 'ripeness' factors and entry-points for dialogue with Islamist armed groups, in order to reduce violence or pave the way for a peaceful political settlement? What is the role of ideology and religious-based dialogue in incentivizing behavioural de-escalation? What strategies are helpful in fostering a conducive environment for engagement, while mitigating spoiling behaviour within the (global) Salafi jihadi scene? What are future options for dialogue engagement by local bridge-builders as well as international third parties? This workshop report summarises the content and outcomes of these discussions.

1 Background and objective of the expert roundtable

On the occasion of launching the research report "*Salafi jihadi armed groups – de-escalation trajectories and dialogue engagement*" on December 11, 2019, the Berghof Foundation conducted an expert roundtable with selected experts and practitioners from governments, international organisations, academia and NGOs to discuss and advance the conversation on the findings of the report and beyond.

Although conflicts with Salafi jihadi armed groups (SJAGs) have been predominantly addressed through military strategies so far, recent policy debates in Mali, Somalia or Syria indicate a growing policy interest in exploring dialogue options in order to decrease violence or to pave the way for a negotiated way out. Yet, dialogue engagement with SJAGs is politically sensitive, difficult to initiate and – given most groups' classification as 'terrorist organisations' – legally problematic. Accordingly, there is not much space to discuss openly and constructively when and how to seek out dialogue with SJAGs, how to mitigate security, strategic and legal challenges, and how to incentivise soft-power engagement strategies with civil society 'bridge-builders', governments and international actors. The expert roundtable offered a confidential safe space for discussions and exchange among practitioners, diplomats and experts. This report presents the main highlights and open questions raised in the four sessions that structured the workshop.

2 Ripeness for conflict de-escalation

The first session aimed to identify how government actors analyse and assess the dynamics of armed conflicts and their 'ripeness' for a possible peaceful/negotiated resolution. Participants discussed the factors of ripeness for armed conflicts with non-state armed groups in general, and examined whether these also apply to Salafi-jihadi armed groups – both in terms of the internal dynamics of these groups, and the external factors influencing conflict dynamics.

The discussion was initiated by a brief presentation on a model assessing negotiation ripeness according to four main criteria: **political will** on both (SJAG/government) sides for a solution; authority and **legitimacy** of the leadership to enter into negotiations; competence and **capacity** to uphold negotiations; and **support from external actors** for a negotiated settlement. In a context such as **Somalia**, leadership behaviour on both sides of the conflict between al-Shabaab and the national government does not seem to be conducive to dialogue, at least in the short term. Political will to find a political solution is lacking on both sides, while the respective parties lack either the necessary authority or capacity for negotiations. Moreover, both parties seem to believe that the other side is not ready to talk, hence rejecting the responsibility on their opponents for failing to consider a negotiated way out. Even if external players increase their interest and support for a peace process, the conflict will only become ripe for a successful negotiation when local actors will decisively step forward to lead the process.

A second input presented a game theory-based matrix that determines ripeness for 'symmetric or asymmetric peace' through an assessment of the conflict parties' **perception of strength** in relation to each other. According to William Zartman's ripeness theory, negotiation is considered more likely when both conflict parties are locked in a 'mutually hurting stalemate'. Beyond power parity, though, if either party perceives their strategic strength to be weakening, 'one-sided ripeness' for dialogue might rise as this party will more likely strive to settle the conflict via negotiations where it cannot do so on the battlefield. In such cases, the talking will start while fighting is ongoing, and dialogue will help prepare the ground towards formal negotiations. The budding peace process in **Afghanistan** shows that there is no need to wait for a mutually-hurting stalemate to initiate dialogue with armed groups.

In the subsequent discussions, participants highlighted the difficulty of assessing the group's perception of strength merely through military power, since one must also take into account psychological and political factors that can influence perceptions of strength on both sides. For instance, the level of legitimacy of the group, or various forms of international intervention, could affect leaders' perception of strength or weakness. Anti-terror legislations in place also affect perceptions of ripeness, as they place additional constraints on dialogue. In fact, the Taliban in **Afghanistan** was deliberately not designated by the US as a Foreign Terrorist Organization, in order to facilitate future negotiation options. According to one participant, one major distinction of SJAGs in comparison with secular armed groups, which strongly affects negotiation ripeness, is their **ideological positioning on human rights**. Indeed, it is deemed extremely difficult for (local or foreign) governments to convince their political leaders and citizens to support dialogue with SJAGs who commit mass atrocities and uphold illiberal agendas on women or minority rights – which decreases their political will to give dialogue a chance.

3 Entry points for dialogue and the role of local bridge-builders

The second session focused on entry points for dialogue with SJAGs, by exploring which third-party actors are best placed to engage in dialogue, how they may access these groups, and in particular, if religious dialogue can serve as an effective entry-point for violence reduction or a negotiated political settlement.

Participants highlighted the central role played by individuals with close ties and trusted relationships with SJAGs in facilitating dialogue spaces and making initial contacts, which can then be nurtured for direct engagement with/by the state. Some of these actors arise from the local social structures of the conflict context, such as **representatives from clan or tribes**. Individuals with a professional connection to SJAGs can also act as effective entry points if they have a track record of credibility and trust in their past interactions with them. These include **journalists** with solid knowledge of these group, their thinking and a record of fair reporting and constructive analysis; independent **lawyers** who have defended detained group members in the past; **business professionals** with a past history of economic interaction with the groups; and local **humanitarian actors**, especially those conducting faith-based charity work. 'Credible' (i.e. respected) **Islamic scholars** can also capitalise on their religious knowledge and commitment to serve as bridge-builders with SJAGs. In addition, **CSOs facilitating inter-community dialogue** around local resource-based or ethnic-based disputes can serve as entry points for engagement with these groups, as was seen in central **Mali** in recent years. The role of **proxies or former members** was also evoked in the context of Mali, where the former political front of a major SJAG (Ansar Dine) moved away from violence and became a signatory group to the 2015 Algiers peace accord. International mediators have made use of this splinter group as an entry-point for indirect access to non-signatory SJAGs. However, another participant noted the risks of initiating dialogue with actors on the periphery of SJAGs, as there is a tendency for the most accessible members to be those with least influence on the top leadership.

The session also gave rise to lively discussions on the role of **religious dialogue as an entry point for political engagement**. According to one practitioner, experience from the **Sahel** shows that faith-based encounters with clerics close to SJAGs – or online debates between respected religious figures and JSAG leaders – may help to open discussions and bring up important issues for internal debate within the armed group, even if they do not necessarily lead to violence de-escalation. They can also foster debates between armed groups on the laws of war and the legitimacy of armed jihad, eventually encouraging behavioural restraint or de-escalation. Another participant challenged the usefulness of the religious angle in **Syria**.

Accordingly, religious leaders are not necessarily reliable entry point to SJAGs active in the Syrian civil war, due to the fluctuating relevance of individual religious figures within these organisations, and hence their position and internal legitimacy change constantly.

Several participants provided examples of positive experience with local 'tacit understandings' such as **informal ceasefires** with SJAGs in **Syria** and **Somalia**, initiated through grassroots connections between mid-level commanders and religious or secular authorities (e.g. sheikhs, ulama or city councils). These forms of local engagement or deal-making are rarely political in nature, they rather focus on humanitarian or governance issues such as access, circulation of goods and persons, or border control. Although they create useful precedents and demonstrate the willingness and capacity of SJAGs to abide by their commitments, these examples do not guarantee that dialogue can 'move up' in the hierarchy or closer to the centre of power, or that formal negotiations are even on the horizon. In fact, in **Mali**, when state-sanctioned negotiators reach out to local SJAG commanders to explore dialogue opportunities, these do not feel they have the legitimacy to talk to them and direct them instead to the central leadership.

Finally, a participant pointed out the role of **SJAGs themselves as potential bridge-builders** or mediators with other armed groups: in a setting with a multitude of (Salafi-jihadi) armed groups such as **Syria**, these have shown the capacity and willingness to act as third party facilitators to address inter-group conflicts. Access to harder-to-reach SJAGs could hence potentially be built upon or established via contacts with more accessible (e.g. pragmatic) Islamist armed groups.

4 Dialogue impediments and mitigation strategies

The third session sought to pinpoint the specific (e.g. legal, political, security, ethical) hindrances to dialogue with SJAGs and to identify strategies to address and mitigate these challenges.

A first set of challenges raised by participants concerns the **nature of these groups and their demands**, including their lack of a credible political agenda, or the absence of any possible common ground for discussions with the government. One also needs to better understand the relationship between interests and values, to identify entry-points for these groups to adopt a more flexible and progressive religious discourse, and to find out what transformation models might appeal to them. Could unarmed Salafi parties and movements, which emerged in the wake of the Arab revolutions, offer a positive outlook for SJAGs?

As highlighted above, another key challenge mentioned throughout the day was the difficulty to move from engaging local commanders or actors at the periphery of the hierarchy towards the central leadership; from informal to formal dialogue; and from talks on humanitarian or governance issues towards political negotiations. Given these groups' strong **transnational connections**, it is also not clear whether local commanders have enough leeway and authority to engage from the bottom-up. Successful strategies must be developed for each particular case, yet long-term engagement and sustained trust-building efforts would help identify strategic openings for negotiations.

Challenges related to SJAGs' external environment also need to be considered, both in terms of local governments and international third parties. For example, **framing narratives** that generalise SJAGs as irrational, zealous actors who cannot be reasoned dominate especially Western public opinions and policy discourses. Diplomats and politicians, but also NGOs dependent on public funding, are wary of the public backlash, which may be provoked if they were to promote conflict resolution with SJAGs. A possible mitigating strategy is the promotion of a more nuanced, context-specific media reporting on SJAGs that avoids sweeping generalisations. The human rights community has also been particularly vocal in its scepticism towards negotiations with groups that openly commit atrocity crimes, even if many human rights activists understand the importance of engagement in curbing IHL violations.

Another international challenge that was repeatedly mentioned was the political instrumentalisation of **anti-terror legislation**, an instrument designed to isolate terrorist-listed armed groups by cutting off their sources of support. The legal implications of sanctions regimes vary, for instance at the UN level humanitarian engagement is exempt from the prohibition to interact with listed groups. Yet the concrete effects of proscription policies can be manifold: in **Mali** for example, international military effort to fight SJAGs has led to a shrinking space for bridge-builders. The targeted assassinations of individuals deemed to have connections with these groups has seriously hampered access to local interlocutors with connections that could have been be utilised for dialogue explorations. Participants also recorded the 'chilling effect' of ambiguous and/or sweeping proscription laws on mediation support organisations as they leave too much space for interpretation and too little legal certainty for NGOs to take the risk to engage with listed groups. This challenge can only be mitigated through continued communication and advocacy towards the policy world on the impediments posed by anti-terror laws. Whereas the European Union's legal provisions are generally more lenient for third-party dialogue engagement with SJAGs compared to US legislation, the British government even took one step further by clarifying that actions taken to promote peace do not fall under their anti-terror provisions. Similar clarification of other (European) states on permitted forms of engagement and red lines would go a long way towards protecting and promoting avenues for peaceful interactions to pave the way for peace processes. Another welcome improvement would be the mobilisation of sanction instruments to incentivise behavioural change, by making de-listing conditional upon behavioural restraint (e.g. adherence to IHL) or encouraging steps towards negotiated conflict resolution.

5 Strategies to foster a conducive environment for conflict resolution

The final session aimed to take stock of discussions throughout the day in order to identify strategies and priorities for government, civil society actors and international third parties to enhance ripeness for conflict resolution with SJAGs by fostering an atmosphere conducive to engagement. Here is a brief summary of the main suggestions offered by participants:

- **Governments** should pursue dialogue with SJAGs as part of a broader framework aiming to address key popular grievances (e.g. improve public services) and promoting national reconciliation; they should also engage in public messaging conveying the urgency of the quest for peace instead of reinforcing polarising narratives of 'us' vs 'them';

- **International actors** should focus on supporting a conducive environment for dialogue by providing technical capacity-building or financial and diplomatic support, but refrain from taking the lead on direct engagement themselves, as local governments need to be in the driving seat of conflict resolution efforts;

- **Conflict resolution (I)NGOs** should continue to promote comparative learning on successful conflict transformation from other relevant contexts to incentivise SJAGs and governments to give dialogue a chance; they should also seize opportunities for encounters with SJAG allies, proxies or members to analyse their perceptions, red lines and windows of opportunities for engagement; they should furthermore nurture contact points and safe spaces for future dialogue processes, by investing in sustained, discreet relationship-building and trust-building efforts.