



Tibverane
Foundation

Policy Paper

IS IT POSSIBLE TO DIALOGUE AND NEGOTIATE WITH *AL-SHABAAB?*

Pathways to De-escalating Armed Violence
and Building a Positive Peace in Northern
Mozambique

| Salvador Forquilha, João Pereira & Emílio Zeca

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Executive summary

In October 2017, an armed group practicing radical Islam attacked state institutions and local populations in the small town of Mocímboa da Praia, in the northern region of Cabo Delgado province. Known locally as al-Shabaab, the armed group quickly spread to other areas of the province and, later, to parts of the neighbouring provinces of Nampula and Niassa. It gained international visibility through its affiliation with the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2019 and the 2021 attack on the town of Palma, near gas projects developed by multinationals such as TotalEnergies, ENI and ExxonMobil. More than eight years after it began, the conflict appears to be far from over.

Based on extensive fieldwork carried out in northern Mozambique and an analysis of the literature on Salafi-jihadist networks in Africa and other regions, this policy paper presents and discusses some ideas for de-escalating the armed conflict and building positive peace in northern Mozambique, with a focus on dialogue and negotiation. The document is divided into three parts. The first part provides a summary of the main dynamics of the conflict. In it, we revisit the factors fuelling the conflict, the leadership structure of the armed group, as well as its transnational links and the development of its logistics. The second part addresses the question: why, with whom, and how should dialogue and negotiation take place? Here, we seek to answer this question, focusing on the modalities of dialogue and negotiation, with particular attention to the risks and challenges. The third and final part of the document addresses the issue of positive peace in northern Mozambique. In it, we deal, in particular, with two fundamental aspects: the first concerns the mapping of opportunities, challenges, risks and uncertainties in the dialogue and negotiation process; the second relates to the design of the negotiation process and the post-negotiation period, with a focus on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration. Finally, based on the research evidence, we present our concluding remarks and formulate recommendations for a potential dialogue and negotiation process, with a view to achieving a lasting solution for northern Mozambique.

The evidence discussed throughout this policy paper suggests that it is possible to engage in dialogue and negotiation with al-Shabaab to de-escalate the armed violence ravaging northern Mozambique and build a positive peace. However, when it comes to conflict resolution, dialogue and negotiation involve challenges, risks, and uncertainties, but also opportunities. Success depends on patience, persistence, and a deep understanding of the causes and dynamics of the conflict and, in the case of northern Mozambique, an understanding of the armed group's leadership structure, its social support base, intelligence, logistics, transnational links, and recruitment mechanisms. Initiating a process of this nature requires clarity, persistence, consistency and political courage. Delaying its commencement would allow violence to take root and become more complex, paving the way for it to become endemic in a territory where the security conditions of local populations are deteriorating and the legitimacy of the state is weakening. In this regard, initiating the process of dialogue and negotiation with al-Shabaab, with a view to building a positive peace, is a task that the Mozambican authorities must undertake as a matter of urgency. After all, northern Mozambique, ravaged by armed violence, is an integral part of Mozambique!

Findings and recommendations

Armed violence in northern Mozambique has been ongoing for more than eight years and, despite all the military efforts undertaken using not only domestic forces but also, initially, mercenaries and, later, forces from Rwanda and the SADC, an end to the violence does not appear to be in sight. Evidence on the ground suggests the need for a new approach to the conflict, one that incorporates other dimensions and prioritises socio-economic and political aspects, based on dialogue and negotiation with the armed group. It is important to note that, in contexts similar to the conflict in northern Mozambique, sustainable long-term solutions require addressing the socio-economic marginalisation, the lack of the rule of law, and the rights violations that fuel the movement. In this context, this *policy paper* recommends:

1. The Government of Mozambique must, with some urgency, seriously explore the possibility of dialogue and negotiation with the armed group responsible for the violence in northern Mozambique. At the same time, it should invest in gaining a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the conflict, prioritising the collection, systematisation and analysis of information on the structure of the armed group, its social support base, its transnational links with other jihadist groups, its logistics network, and its recruitment mechanisms.
2. Once the decision to engage in dialogue and negotiation has been taken, the Government of Mozambique must focus its attention on the national (Mozambican) elements within the armed group's leadership, rather than on foreign elements or its religious ideology.
3. The Government of Mozambique must identify and engage mediators with in-depth knowledge of how Salafist-jihadist armed groups operate. The mediators should be trusted individuals who can establish contacts with the Mozambican leadership of al-Shabaab. At the same time, the Government of Mozambique must structure its agenda for dialogue and negotiation.
4. In the post-dialogue and negotiation period, the integration and reintegration process should be an initiative led by the Government of Mozambique and civil society organisations, supported by the international community and other actors, aimed at rehabilitating low-risk defectors through ideological and religious re-education, counselling and vocational training.
5. Training packages must be provided to the government, political and security bodies on why, with whom and how to engage in dialogue and negotiation with Salafi-jihadist groups.

Introduction

In October 2017, an armed group practicing radical Islam attacked state institutions and local populations in the small town of Mocímboa da Praia, in the northern region of Cabo Delgado province. Known locally as al-Shabaab, the armed group quickly spread to other areas of the province and, later, to parts of the neighbouring provinces of Nampula and Niassa. It gained international visibility through its affiliation with the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2019 and the 2021 attack on the town of Palma, near gas projects developed by multinationals such as TotalEnergies, ENI and ExxonMobil.

More than eight years after it began, the conflict appears to be far from over. Although it incorporates some socio-economic aspects, such as the creation of the Northern Integrated Development Agency (ADIN)¹, the Mozambican state's response to the phenomenon has been predominantly military, with little evidence of actions leading to any negotiated or political solution to the conflict. In fact, since the onset of armed violence, attempts to make contact with the armed group appear to have been scarce. However, at least three such attempts can be mentioned. The first attempt refers to the contact that resulted in the release of two Catholic missionaries who had been abducted and held hostage by the armed group during the attack on Mocímboa da Praia on 12 August 2020 (Lisbon, 2024). The other two attempts were more ambitious, aiming to explore options for a possible dialogue with al-Shabaab (Observador, 2023). Although the first was successful, insofar as it resulted in the release of the missionaries, the other two did not produce tangible results that could lead to a dialogue with the armed group.

Based on extensive fieldwork carried out in northern Mozambique between 2018 and 2025, and on an analysis of the literature on Salafi-jihadist networks in Africa and other regions, this paper presents and discusses some ideas for the de-escalation of the armed conflict and the building of positive peace in northern Mozambique, with a focus on dialogue and negotiation. The document is divided into three parts. The first part provides a summary of the main dynamics of the conflict. In it, we revisit the factors fuelling the conflict, the leadership structure of the armed group, as well as its transnational links and the development of its logistics. The second part addresses the question: why, with whom, and how should dialogue and negotiation take place? Here, we seek to answer the question, focusing on the modalities of dialogue and negotiation, with particular attention to the risks and challenges. The third and final part of the document addresses the issue of positive peace in northern Mozambique. In doing so, we address two key aspects in particular: the first concerns the mapping of opportunities, challenges, risks, and uncertainties in the dialogue and negotiation process; the second aspect relates to the design of the negotiation process and the post-negotiation period, with a focus on demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration. Based on the evidence from our research, we have formulated recommendations for a potential dialogue and negotiation process aimed at achieving a lasting solution for northern Mozambique.

¹ Decree No. 9/2020 of 18 March establishing the Northern Integrated Development Agency, hereinafter referred to as ADIN. Maputo: Imprensa Nacional.

1. Dynamics of the conflict

Since the onset of armed violence in 2017, numerous analyses have been produced by journalists, researchers and opinion-makers. Despite their diversity in terms of focus and arguments, these analyses seem to converge on the idea that a multiplicity of factors explains the conflict. In this regard, the jihadist-inspired armed violence in northern Mozambique, which manifests itself through rural guerrilla actions, violent extremism, terrorism, and armed subversion, is essentially fuelled by two sets of factors: internal and external.

With regard to internal factors, the extensive literature on Salafi-jihadist-inspired armed groups in Africa demonstrates how important they are in shaping the dynamics of the emergence and development of jihadist insurgencies. In the specific case of northern Mozambique, internal factors refer to the social, economic, and political conditions conducive to the emergence and expansion of the insurgency, namely feelings of ethnic, social, economic, and political exclusion, relative deprivation and various tensions. Exploited and mobilised by the armed group, these conditions enabled the construction of an anti-state narrative, which served as a catalyst for young people to join the group through a complex recruitment mechanism that extended beyond the borders of Mocimboa da Praia and Cabo Delgado.

As for external factors, these relate primarily to the influence of Salafi-jihadist ideologies from radical cells linked to Koranic schools in East Africa, particularly Tanzania, Kenya and Somalia, crystallising the transnational dimension of al-Shabaab. In practice, this transnational dimension translates into links with groups based in countries where al-Shabaab sought specific elements, such as ideological inspiration (Kenya – Aboudo Rogo), military training (Democratic Republic of the Congo – ADF) and integration into the global jihadist network (ISIS). These are factors that contribute to the perpetuation of armed violence in northern Mozambique. However, internal and external factors alone would not have allowed for the emergence and development of al-Shabaab without a solid leadership structure within the armed group.

1.1. Al-Shabaab's leadership structure

Our research suggests that the functional structure of the armed group's leadership was shaped by local context and global influence at two distinct moments: first, prior to the arrival of Islamic State (ISIS), during the group's embryonic phase from 2017 to 2019; and second, following the arrival of ISIS in 2019, up to the present day. Following the first attack, the group organised itself into district commands, covering all districts of Cabo Delgado, with a centralised religious leadership and a dispersed military leadership. This structure enabled the establishment of a model of governance and a functional administrative structure, under the responsibility of a spiritual leader and an operational leader.

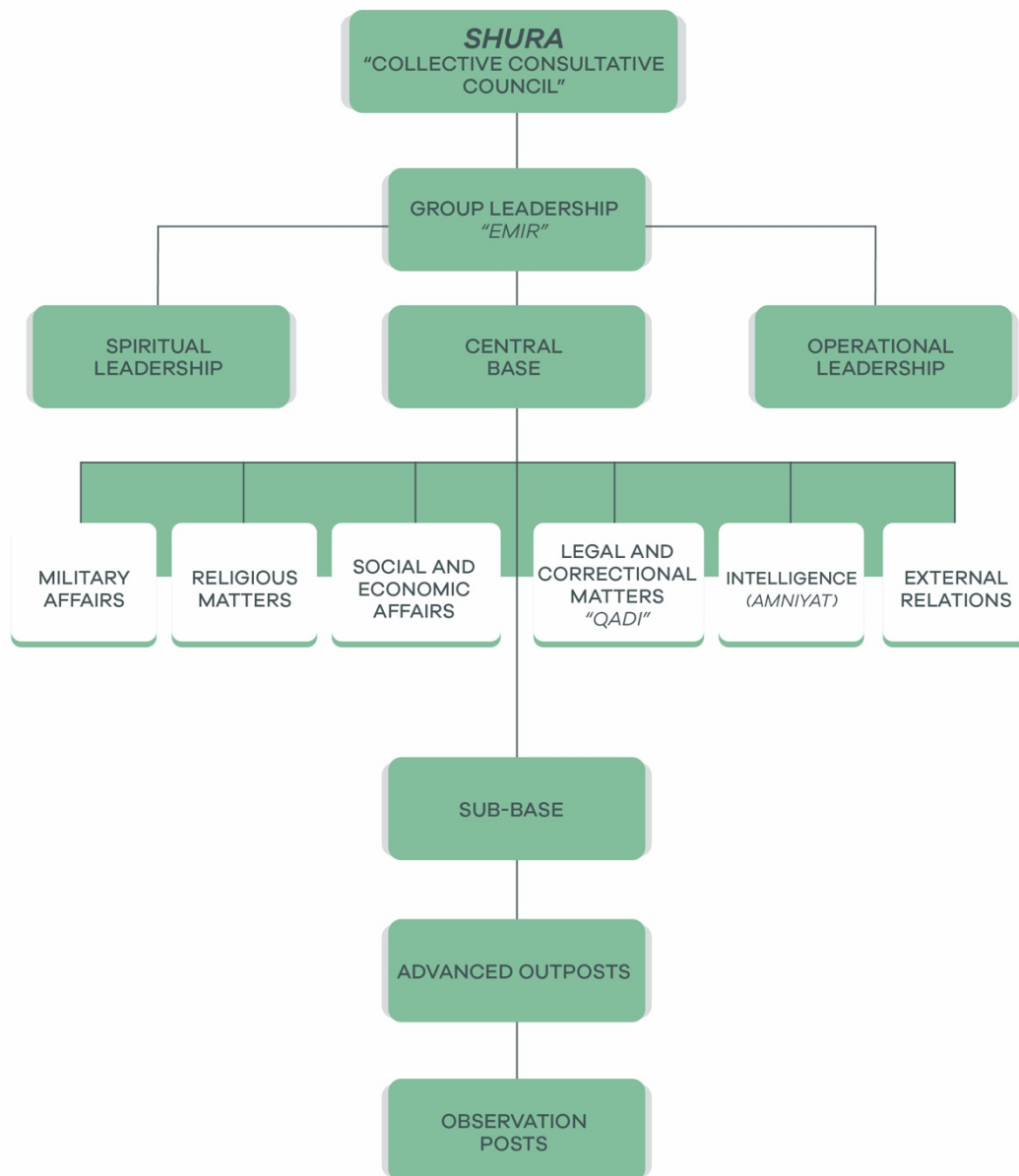
During the occupation of Mocimboa da Praia (from August 2020 to August 2021), an administrative structure was established comprising a *Shura* (Council for mutual consultation and collective decision-making), inspired by the Qur'an (42:38), and various "departments" or "service sectors", namely: Social and Economic Affairs;

Religious Affairs; Legal and Correctional Affairs; Military Affairs; Intelligence Services (*Amniyat*); and Foreign Affairs.

With the Defence and Security Forces (FDS) and their allies from Rwanda and the SADC regaining control of Mocímboa da Praia and Palma, al-Shabaab opted for a strategy of dispersion, contraction, and adaptation, establishing its central base in Macomia, in the Namarussia and Saina area. Similarly, sub-bases, outposts, and observation posts were established, following a concentric model from the centre outwards. This structure enabled the group to create a layered and deep defence system, a military strategy dating back to ancient Rome and China, as well as to the Cold War, during the threats of confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact (Dyer, 1985; Healy, 1994; Williams, 2005; Meyskens, 2020; Cotton-Barratt, Daniel & Sandberg, 2020).



Figure 1: Organisational and functional structure of al-Shabaab in northern Mozambique



Source: Prepared by the authors

Over nearly a decade of existence, the armed group has managed to build a social support base, a functional intelligence network, and an effective logistics chain, comprising both local and transnational elements.

1.2. Social support base, intelligence network, and logistics

As regards its social support base, it is heterogeneous and complex, comprising local and global elements, shaped by local fault lines that include political, economic, social, religious and security issues, as well as inter-communal tensions, systemic marginalisation and fragile governance processes. Although frequently associated with transnational Salafist ideology, the armed group gains support primarily by

exploiting local social, political, economic, and religious grievances, and not merely religious fervour.

In this context, the armed group has managed to establish a sophisticated network for the collection, analysis, and dissemination of information relevant to its operations. In practice, al-Shabaab's intelligence network operates through informants, who gather information which is reported to the unit responsible for intelligence, known as 'Amniyat', which collects, analyses, and disseminates information relevant to intelligence operations, counter-intelligence, decision-making, and the conduct of military operations. This network provides information on the movements of forces involved in counter-insurgency operations on the ground. Similarly, the network provides information on the locations of mineral, forest, and marine resources, safe local routes, as well as safe locations where they intend to attack, seek logistics or strategic refuge. The intelligence network has managed to penetrate deeply into national civil and military institutions.

As for its logistical component, it has been structured into a network and a complex system, which facilitate the movement and support of the group's members through local and foreign resources. This network involves various actors and mechanisms, including recruitment, logistics proper, and the coordination of operations. Recruitment has been carried out through friendships, family ties, religious and financial inducements, as well as by coercive means, under threat of beheading and other forms of blackmail. Furthermore, the logistics network encompasses a variety of activities, such as the provision of material support and training. The coordination network is decentralised, with groups carrying out activities independently but under central coordination. The external arm has an international reach, with individuals hailing from various countries and regions across Africa and the Middle East.

Thus, understanding the leadership structure, the composition of the social support base, the dynamics of the intelligence network, and the operational mechanisms of al-Shabaab's network and logistics corridors is crucial for any action involving combat, dialogue, or negotiation with the armed group. The mechanisms and dynamics of the spread of radical religious ideologies, which fuel armed violence in northern Mozambique, constitute another critical element for any initiative involving dialogue or negotiation, with a view to the definitive resolution of the conflict.

2. Why, with whom, and how should dialogue and negotiations take place?

Experiences from different corners of the world, particularly in the Sahel, Nigeria, Somalia, the Congo, and even the Middle East, show that Salafi-jihadist-inspired armed groups continue to resist military approaches, to a greater or lesser extent. Consequently, initiatives for political dialogue have recently emerged between the governments of these territories and jihadist groups, facilitated, mediated, and supported by state and non-state actors at local, regional, and international levels (Dudouet & Göldner-Ebenthal, 2020; Cavallaro et al., 2022), producing diverse and interesting results that may serve as inspiration for the conflict in northern

Mozambique.

2.1. Experiences of dialogue and negotiation with jihadist groups in Africa

The cases of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso are emblematic for examining common and context-specific trends in negotiation efforts and the search for political solutions to conflicts involving jihadist armed groups. Let us consider, albeit briefly, the cases mentioned above:

The **case of Mauritania**: this can be considered the most successful in the Sahel region, given that the state has not been significantly affected by the jihadist insurgency since 2011. This success is attributed to its multidimensional deradicalisation strategy, which emphasises establishing a religious dialogue with jihadists detained in prisons to discuss crucial issues, such as the legitimacy of violence and jihad.

The **case of Mali**: the first attempts at dialogue with the Ansar al-Din group were made by the High Islamic Council of Mali, led by Mahmoud Dicko, who travelled to the north of the country to explore the prospects for dialogue and negotiation with the armed factions. Subsequently, dialogue sessions were sponsored by the then President of Burkina Faso, Blaise Compaoré, who personally received representatives of the Ansar al-Din group; this was followed by the National Reconciliation Conference (2017) and the Inclusive National Dialogue (2019). A faction of a local militia in the Ségou region signed a peace agreement in 2021, and the Malian Armed Forces participated in a hostage exchange in 2020. Although these initiatives were not successful, they contributed to fragmenting the Ansar al-Din group, driving away moderate members of the movement who were open to dialogue and negotiation.

The **case of Niger**: under the presidency of Mohamed Bazoum (2021–2023), dialogue and negotiations with Islamic militant groups were considered a crucial component of the National Counter-Terrorism Strategy, following the Mauritanian model. In 2022, dialogue began with jihadist leaders, resulting in the release of several prisoners. A peace agreement between the Fulani and the Zarma was facilitated, leading to socio-economic stabilisation and reducing the resurgence of jihadist recruitment in the region.

The **case of Burkina Faso**: the initiative to engage in dialogue with the jihadists was led mainly by local communities, given the government's difficulties in controlling the insurgency. In an effort to understand the jihadists' motives and their willingness to return to besieged villages; several local leaders have engaged in dialogue processes, resulting in "minor" lifting of blockades. Apparently, the Government of Burkina Faso softened its stance against dialogue in 2022, advocating a hybrid strategy that would encompass both a military approach and a political approach based on dialogue

2.2. Peace initiatives in the context of armed violence in northern Mozambique

Regarding the Mozambican case, although there has been no strong signal, at least officially, from the government to initiate any negotiation process with al-Shabaab, there have been some initiatives from national and foreign non-state actors, with a local focus and centred on dialogue. The following table (Table 1) summarises some of these initiatives and their respective scopes.

Table 1: Peace initiatives in the context of armed violence in northern Mozambique

Peace Initiative	Location	Implementers	Scope
Interfaith Centre for Peace – CIPAZ.	Cabo Delgado: Pemba	Commission for Interfaith Dialogue and Ecumenism of the Parish of São Carlos Lwanga and Local Leaders of CISLAMO.	Initiative aimed at contributing to the promotion of dialogue for peace and social harmony; and the mutual recognition that dialogue constitutes the foundation of the understanding necessary for peace.
Interreligious Dialogue in Northern Mozambique	Maputo/northern Mozambique	MASC Foundation and Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IESE)	An initiative based on research and the organisation of interfaith workshops to reflect on and seek creative solutions to the crisis in northern Mozambique, as well as to promote and ensure mutual respect among different religious beliefs as a means of preventing religious conflicts.
Peace-making Advisory Group Cabo Delgado – PAG	Johannesburg: South Africa	Institute for Good Governance in Africa	Initiative based on constructive engagement, discussions, and consultations among stakeholders to find pathways toward sustainable dialogue, with a view to reaching a political solution to the armed conflict in Cabo Delgado.
Dialogue Advisory Group – DAG	Amsterdam: Netherlands	Independent Initiative	An initiative based on an independent advisory group that proposes conflict resolution, focusing on interest-based negotiations to address specific grievances and factors fuelling the conflict.
Cordoba Peace Institute in Switzerland and Friends of Peace in Tanzania	Geneva: Switzerland	Cordoba Peace Institute in Switzerland	An initiative based on bringing the parties in conflict closer together through facilitation, mediation and dialogue, with a view to finding a political solution to the conflict.
Peace Clubs	Nampula and Cabo Delgado	CISLAMO and the Embassy of the United States of America	A community initiative focused on reconciliation, dialogue and social reintegration through sport, debates and cultural activities, with a strong emphasis on education for non-violence and social cohesion.

Source: Prepared by the authors

As regards results, none of the peace initiatives mentioned above led to a de-escalation of armed violence in northern Mozambique. This can be explained by at least three fundamental reasons. The first relates to the fact that most initiatives were not clearly focused on dialogue and negotiation with the leadership of the armed

group, but rather on creating an environment for dialogue and possible negotiation. The second relates to limited knowledge of the dynamics within al-Shabaab: its leadership structure, the composition of its social support base, its logistics, as well as the operational mechanisms of its intelligence network. And finally, the third reason concerns the lack of clear support from the Government of Mozambique. Given these rather negative results, why is it important to continue to insist on peace initiatives based on dialogue and negotiation for northern Mozambique?

2.3. Why continue to insist on peace initiatives and with whom to engage in dialogue and negotiation?

Almost a decade after the onset of armed violence, the almost exclusive prioritisation of a military solution does not seem capable of leading to de-escalation and the establishment of a stable and lasting peace. In Peace and Conflict Studies and Diplomatic Studies, there is an aphorism that ‘armed conflicts always end at the negotiation table’, and conflicts involving religious aspects are understood as unique phenomena (Sheikh, 2020). Dialogue and negotiation are fundamental elements for the peaceful resolution of armed conflicts, as they offer a path to stable and lasting peace. Dialogue and negotiation are part of ethical and practical choices that recognise the human dignity of the other, seeking agreements that address the root causes of a conflict, as well as the needs, values, and interests of the parties involved. Consequently, in the current context of armed violence in northern Mozambique, dialogue and negotiation emerge as important tools for creating the conditions for the de-escalation of the conflict.

With whom to engage in dialogue and negotiation? Throughout all these years in which armed violence has been ravaging northern Mozambique, a narrative has been constructed of a “faceless enemy, without a voice or demands”. Fuelled and perpetuated by the Government of Mozambique and public opinion in general (DW, 2019), this narrative jeopardises any potential negotiated solution to the conflict, insofar as it strips away the identity, discourse and demands of a counterpart with whom one could effectively engage in dialogue and negotiation. In reality, the narrative of a “faceless enemy, without a discourse or demands” has been contradicted by the facts on the ground: al-Shabaab, which operates in northern Mozambique, not only has a face, crystallised in the well-known leadership of its operational structure, but also has a discourse and demands, evident in its many audio recordings, propaganda videos, letters circulated in villages and in its vast documentation captured by the forces deployed in Cabo Delgado, notably the material presented by the Southern African Development Community Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM), at the mission’s closing ceremony, presided over by the Minister of National Defence, in Pemba, on a day in July 2024 (Rádio Moçambique, 2024).

Mozambique could draw inspiration from other experiences and practices of dialogue and negotiation with Salafi-jihadist armed groups in Africa, which have met with some success, albeit for short periods. These experiences and practices have focused dialogue and negotiation efforts on two main levels, summarised below:

Top-level: at this level, the process involves the leadership of both parties to the conflict, either directly or through emissaries. Specifically, these are actors such as the President of the Republic, the Head of Government or their representatives, on the government side, with or without the support of Military Intelligence and State

Intelligence, and, on the armed group's side, the group's leadership. In many cases, at this level, emissaries, facilitators, and negotiators have played a significant role, particularly in the initial stages and during the process of bringing the parties together, with a view to creating a reliable and credible platform for dialogue and negotiation. Therefore, interactions at this level are aimed at political, strategic, and structural decision-making to bring the conflict to an end and involve the highest-ranking leaders of the parties concerned.

Grassroots level: at this level, the process involves community dialogues between various leaders and social, community and religious actors, with a view to preparing communities to deal with: a) those directly involved in the conflict; b) transitional justice processes within the community; c) the integration of former members of the armed group into society, amongst other aspects. Community, traditional and religious leaders have played an important role as key intermediaries, translating the norms and principles of governance of jihadist armed groups in a negotiated and contextualised manner. In this context, community, inter-religious and intra-religious dialogue has been one of the key practices, as well as the discussion of issues relating to combatants, DDR², children, women and anything else that may help reduce the likelihood of continued or renewed armed violence. This level also involves dialogue between the Government and local communities.

As mentioned above, when we mapped the various cases of dialogue initiatives between governments and jihadist armed groups, particularly in Africa, the specificities of the context are a fundamental element, insofar as they affect not only the course but also the outcomes of the process. Therefore, although the two levels mentioned above (top-down and bottom-up) are fundamental, in practice there are variations. In the case of Mozambique, dialogue and negotiation could be conducted at three levels, namely: top, intermediate and grassroots. At the top, the process would involve so-called "First Track Diplomacy", which would encompass the political leadership of the Mozambican state and that of the armed group. At this level, the parties could be assisted by so-called "Second Track Diplomacy" (technicians, experts, and intelligence services) to collect, analyse and disseminate information to support decision-making processes. At the intermediate level, the process would focus on al-Shabaab sub-base commanders, who have access to and influence over the armed group's top leadership. At the grassroots level, the process would need to be carried out with local communities and the general population, with a view to addressing local grievances, which form part of the root causes underlying the armed conflict.

At all the levels mentioned, it would be important to take external actors into account, notably the international community, with a view to creating effective conditions for the implementation of the terms of a potential peace agreement. Having reached this point, the question is: how should dialogue and negotiation take place?

Regarding the 'how', there are two fundamental aspects to consider: a) vertical interaction between actors and communication regarding the process; b) the timeframe for dialogue and negotiation.

With regard to the vertical interaction of the actors, the process can be conducted directly, involving the leadership of the parties involved in the conflict; or indirectly,

² DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

involving intermediate and grassroots levels, with the support of national and international facilitators, mediators and good offices. As for the form of communication regarding the process, dialogue and negotiation may take place openly, with press releases, or in a closed and secret manner. Whichever approach is taken, it requires constructive engagement from the parties, with a view to achieving a stable and lasting solution.

Regarding the timeframe for dialogue and negotiation, the strategies and tactics to be employed may be based on short- or long-term processes. In the past, there has already been at least one short-term initiative to engage in dialogue with the armed group, which resulted in the release of hostages – the case of the Catholic missionaries in Mocímboa da Praia (Lisbon, 2024). Furthermore, there have been community-led negotiation initiatives aimed at securing the release of family members or access to local resources. Similarly, there have been initiatives by humanitarian agencies involving dialogue with the armed group to facilitate assistance in conflict areas and the collection of the *jizya*, by negotiating with local commanders at sub-bases. These experiences focus on practical and immediate issues, such as hostage rescue, access to locations for humanitarian assistance, the reduction of fees at *check-points* or the payment of *jizya*³.

3. Towards a positive peace in northern Mozambique

In Peace Studies, positive peace is the term used to contrast with the view of peace as a mere absence of war, understood as negative peace. In this case, positive peace consists of the “absence of physical, structural and cultural violence, as well as the presence of social justice” (Galtung, 1969), a situation rich in positive content, such as the restoration of relations, the creation of social systems that serve the interests of the entire population, and the constructive resolution of conflicts (UN, 2001). With regard to northern Mozambique, strategies for successful constructive engagement, the development of the dialogue and negotiation process, and the post-dialogue and post-negotiation scenarios are important for creating the conditions for positive peace. One suggestion for the process is to separate the local and global dimensions of the conflict. In separating these dimensions, initial dialogue and negotiation efforts must be directed towards the Mozambican leadership of the armed group and its local factions that are moderate and open to a political solution to the conflict, using pragmatic approaches, rather than giving priority to radical and ideological stances, particularly those of foreign leaders. In this process, the use of intermediaries is an option. In this regard, trusted third parties such as local leaders, NGOs, local religious groups, relatives of group members, and other relevant actors could be involved to initiate contacts. This process requires a continuous assessment of the group’s internal dynamics, its logistical network and its links to the global jihadist ideological network.

The process of dialogue and negotiation, with a view to establishing a positive peace in northern Mozambique, could be implemented in stages and using incremental models. One could begin by identifying the armed group’s key points and actual demands; listing the Mozambican Government’s positions; drawing up a negotiation

³ According to Islamic precepts, *Jizya* is a per capita tax levied on non-Muslims in an Islamic State. This tax applies to able-bodied adult men of military age who have the means to pay, although there are situations where exemptions apply (Ali, 1991; Kennedy, 2004; Silva, 2002).

agenda; and engaging credible and trustworthy facilitators and mediators capable of acting as good offices. The initial objectives may focus on the cessation of military hostilities, a local ceasefire, humanitarian access or the release of prisoners and hostages, before moving on to consolidated negotiations involving al-Shabaab's senior leadership and Mozambique's senior political leadership.

3.1. Key opportunities, challenges, risks and uncertainties

Experiences from other parts of the world suggest that dialogue and negotiation processes with Salafi-jihadist armed groups involve not only opportunities and challenges but also risks and uncertainties. In the following paragraphs, we outline, albeit briefly, the opportunities, challenges, risks and uncertainties of a potential dialogue and negotiation process aimed at a lasting solution in northern Mozambique.

Opportunities: factors that may favour the initiation of a process of dialogue and negotiation.

- The presence of Mozambicans within the armed group's leadership structure.
- The strong internal dimension of the conflict, based on internal divisions: local religious divisions within Islam, ethnic divisions, social, economic and political exclusion, and the exploitation of the anti-state/anti-Frelimo narrative.
- The willingness and availability of some local religious leaders to facilitate a potential process of dialogue and negotiation for peace.
- Mozambique's experience with negotiations in previous conflicts, albeit of a different nature.

Challenges: factors that may constitute an obstacle to the initiation of a process of dialogue and negotiation.

- A misunderstanding of the nature of the conflict may lead to the absence of a comprehensive approach.
- Al-Shabaab's vision for the country, based on Sharia law, runs counter to the principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Mozambique and calls into question the secular nature of the Mozambican state.
- The lack of political will on the part of the Mozambican authorities to initiate any serious dialogue with al-Shabaab.
- The capture of the state by criminal groups operating within the state apparatus, using institutions—including the police, the army, and the secret services—for the benefit of personal interests and gains or those of particular groups. These criminals have helped establish a war economy in the region, promoting all kinds of trafficking, particularly drug trafficking.
- The establishment of a local war economy: war has become a lucrative business.

- The presence of foreign nationals within the leadership structure of the armed group and their links to the global jihadist network.

Risks: factors that could set the process back and have a negative impact on a solution based on dialogue and negotiation.

- Failed process: if dialogue and negotiation are not conducted through effective strategies, their negative outcomes may be counterproductive and make the armed group more determined, radical, and less convinced of the Mozambican Government's good intentions regarding dialogue and negotiation.
- Emergence of interest groups: throughout the process, state and non-state actors may emerge who do not identify with Mozambique's national interest and the need to end armed violence, and who prioritise their own needs, values, and group interests, thereby creating competition within the process or turning it into a mere exercise in 'forum shopping'.
- Legitimacy: if dialogue and negotiation are not conducted with actors who have legitimacy amongst the parties to the conflict, there is a risk of strengthening or legitimising internal and external extremist actors who do not believe in a political solution to the conflict.
- Credibility: by opting for a strategy and tactics of open dialogue, the Government of Mozambique may appear to be giving in to terrorism, in an international system where the majority maintains that one does not negotiate with terrorists. At the same time, the leadership of the armed group may lose its alliance with global jihadist groups such as ISIS.

Uncertainties: factors that increase the unpredictability of the dialogue and negotiation process.

- Sustainability and maintenance of the process: the evolution of the conflict and the level of armed violence in northern Mozambique, as well as extremism and terrorism, place pressure on government structures, which must choose between dialogue and negotiation or continuing with military operations in the event of a deadlock during negotiations.
- Emergence of factions within the armed group: dialogue and negotiation offer opportunities to end armed violence in northern Mozambique. However, as is the case in other contexts, such as the Sahel, the emergence of rival factions within the armed group is an ever-present possibility, although this is not yet the case with al-Shabaab. The emergence of any factions would pose additional difficulties for a negotiated solution to the conflict.
- Content of the negotiations: "what to negotiate?" This is one of the most critical points of the process, in that, until a common agenda for negotiations is agreed, the parties have no control over what is to be negotiated.

- External actors within the armed group: the presence of external actors brings with it uncertainty regarding the dialogue and negotiation process, insofar as there is no guarantee that they will accept a political solution to the conflict until they know what their fate will be.
- From the very early stages of the insurgency, its members have always demonstrated a high capacity for resilience and adaptation. In this regard, to address the opportunities, challenges, risks and uncertainties of dialogue and negotiation for a positive peace, these aspects must be approached in a creative, holistic and integrated manner. What engagement strategies can be used to achieve a negotiated solution to the armed violence in northern Mozambique? This is what we will briefly address in the following lines.

3.2. Design of the negotiation process and the post-negotiation period

With regard to the dialogue and negotiation process, it is necessary to take into account the structural decisions that define ‘the why, what, who, how, when and where’ to initiate and advance dialogue and negotiations (IFIT, 2017). The development of this process includes key aspects such as mapping the actors; defining the substantive and procedural agenda; the phases, sequencing and stages of the processes to be taken into account, namely the ceasefire, the peace agreement, DDR, social, political, and security reforms, mechanisms for inclusion and transitional justice, and the division of power and resources. Similarly, guarantees for compliance with the agreements, verification commissions and national and international monitoring, the management of expectations and the communication model are defined.

The post-dialogue and negotiation phase is critical, as it involves the implementation of the aspects defined in the process. It involves aspects related to integration and reintegration, programmes and resources for reconstruction, and peace-building initiatives, which may eventually culminate in apologies and truth-telling, forgiveness and reconciliation, accompanied by transitional justice, peaceful coexistence and security (Kriesberg, 1998; Villa-Vicencio, 1998; Crocker, 2000). In the case of al-Shabaab, reintegration must take into account a plan focused on the surrender and re-entry into communities of combatants and civilians living in conflict zones under the control of the armed group.

The integration and reintegration process must be an initiative led by the Government of Mozambique and civil society organisations, supported by the international community and other actors, aimed at rehabilitating low-risk deserters through ideological and religious re-education, counselling and vocational training. The programme should aim to safely reintegrate ex-combatants into society and their communities through psychosocial rehabilitation centres and vocational and professional training, which offer an alternative to the rebel way of life and judicial proceedings. These programmes should be based on the following key pillars: a clear target population, a rehabilitation and reintegration process, incentives, a support structure, addressing root causes, and social transformation.

Concluding remarks

The evidence discussed throughout this policy paper suggests that it is possible to engage in dialogue and negotiation with al-Shabaab to de-escalate the armed violence ravaging northern Mozambique and build a positive peace. However, when it comes to conflict resolution, dialogue and negotiation involve challenges, risks, and uncertainties. But they also involve opportunities. Success depends on patience, persistence, and a deep understanding of the dynamics of the conflict and, in the case of northern Mozambique, includes the armed group's leadership structure, its social support base, its intelligence, its logistics, its transnational links, and its recruitment mechanisms. Success also depends on establishing a solid foundation for a process of dialogue and negotiation, involving relevant and committed actors from both sides and adopting an approach that builds trust. The aim is to transform violent non-state actors into non-violent participants.

For northern Mozambique, dialogue and negotiation must have short-, medium- and long-term objectives. In the short term, the objective must be to achieve negative peace, understood as the cessation of military hostilities. In the medium and long term, dialogue and negotiation must aim for positive peace, which involves the cessation of hostilities, social justice and transitional justice, territorial transformation, the fate of foreign members of the armed group, the DDR process, and psychosocial support. Such support must be prioritised for local populations directly affected by the violence, particularly children and women, and for former members of the armed group who decide to lay down their arms and return to their communities. Initiating a process of this nature requires clarity, persistence, consistency and political courage. Delaying its commencement would allow the violence to take root and become more complex, creating conditions for it to become endemic in a territory where the security conditions of local populations are deteriorating and the legitimacy of the State is weakening. In this regard, initiating the process of dialogue and negotiation with al-Shabaab, with a view to building a positive peace, is a task that the Mozambican authorities must undertake with a sense of urgency. After all, northern Mozambique, ravaged by armed violence, is also Mozambique!



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About the authors:

Salvador Forquilha

He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Bordeaux in France. He is an Associate Researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IESE) and an Assistant Professor at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. Dr. Forquilha collaborates with the Tibverane Foundation. His research focuses on the dynamics of state-building, political violence, and social cohesion.

João C.G. Pereira

He holds a PhD in Political Science from the University of Cape Town in South Africa. He serves as Executive Director of the Tibverane Foundation. Dr. Pereira is an Associate Researcher at the Institute for Social and Economic Studies (IESE) and an Assistant Professor at Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. His research focuses on governance, elections, and political violence.

Emílio Zeca

He holds a PhD in Strategic and International Studies, a Master's in Conflict Resolution, and a degree in International Relations and Diplomacy. Dr. Zeca is a Lecturer in Security, Peace and Conflict Studies and a Researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies – CEEI/UJC, where he works in the Department of Peace and Security.



About the Tibverane Foundation:

The **Tibverane Foundation** is an independent, non-partisan, non-governmental and non-profit organisation that focuses on promoting innovative and inclusive approaches to peacebuilding, conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance and socio-economic development in Mozambique. We ensure that peace and reconciliation processes are inclusive and representative of the needs and aspirations of all stakeholders, including marginalised groups. We conduct research, advise policymakers and provide technical assistance to governments, mediators and civil society organisations, helping to facilitate inclusive peace processes and build trust between civilians, government institutions and defence and security forces. We also advocate for the inclusion of civil society, marginalised communities, young people and women from fragile, high-risk and conflict-affected areas in peace negotiations and decision-making processes at local, provincial and national levels.

HEAD OFFICE | CABO DELGADO

Edifício de INSS, 4° Andar, Bairro de Expansão
Pemba – Mozambique
(+258) 83 511 2726 | 84 539 5677 | 86 489 9538
info@tibveranefoundation.org

SUBOFFICE | MAPUTO

Av. da Marginal, 2° Andar, Bloco A, Edifício Jardim Centenário
Maputo – Mozambique
(+258) 84 398 3782 | 82 304 9946
info@tibveranefoundation.org

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