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Should we negotiate with armed terrorist groups?

The idea of normalizing relations with radical Islamism – unthinkable in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks, is also unrealistic. The battles won against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and the Islamic State group on the Syrian-Iraqi axis have failed to defeat a fragmented adversary, one that persists in rejecting the idea of peaceful coexistence between peoples.

Armed Islamist groups believe that victory is achieved through a permanent conflict on “godless” nations, with the outcome of the fight being less important than the commitment to sustained operations costly in human lives, thereby demonstrating the timelessness of Islam. Conversely, the nations mobilized in the fight against terrorism intrinsically believe that victory leads to a renunciation of hostilities and the opening of negotiations.

Failing to obtain peace through military crushing, mediation or dogma, the confrontation continues without any formulation of the peace that should be concluded, negotiated, or imposed on the armed groups, of the terms of cohabitation of our respective societies; one conservative Islamist, the other secular social liberal.

The first step

In 2009, the year Washington planned to send four thousand additional troops to Afghanistan to press the insurgency, a Taliban leader was identified as a target of interest: Abdul Ghani Baradar, then in charge of the Taliban’s military, religious and financial activities¹. The few available sources on Baradar speak of a man determined to expel foreign forces, but not averse to negotiation. A commander in Zalib province described him in these words: “He is patient and

¹ Abdul Ghani Baradar is a co-founder of the Taliban, which operates out of Baluchistan province in southwest Pakistan. Although the majority of the members are Pashtuns (Ghilzai, Durrani), this movement is not ethno-nationalist. The Ishaqzai, Noorzai and Alizai tribes participate in the war effort. Follower of the Deobandi rite born in 1866 in Deoband (India), the Taliban call for an Islamic revival based on a strict and puritanical reading of the Sharia and the Sunna.

listens to you until the end. He doesn't get angry or lose his temper"². Captured in a joint CIA-Pakistani operation, Baradar was imprisoned for eight years. Upon his release, informal contacts were initiated between the Taliban and the Americans³. It led to the signing of an agreement in Doha in 2020, the first step in a round of negotiations to determine the terms of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan⁴.

With Baradar Washington broke a taboo: negotiating with a group known for its links with al-Qaeda and its involvement in various forms of trafficking (drugs, minerals, antiquities). The movement contains men with controversial profiles such as Seraj Haqqani, whose father, Jallaluddin, led an eponymous group that interfaced between al-Qaeda and the late Mullah Omar. The group was also known for its inflexibility: despite its calls for "patience and tolerance"⁵, Baradar refused cease-fire proposals; and at most agreed to stop harassing the American troops. He remained unclear on the delta point of the negotiations: the withdrawal of American forces in exchange for a total and unequivocal break with terrorism⁶.

The sincerity of the Taliban has been uncertain from the onset of the Doha process. In 2019, while intense negotiations were underway, the Taliban carried out 1,375 attacks that earned them the unenviable title of the world's deadliest group⁷. While this aggressive policy prevailed, a historic al-Qaeda leader, Husam abd-al-Ra'uf, the would-be successor to al-Zawahiri, was neutralized in a Taliban-controlled district, Andar⁸.

The Taliban signature has several weaknesses:

- ⇒ Unclear leadership. Baradar makes the trip to Doha, but executive power remains in the hands of the Quetta Shura, the decision-making council⁹.
- ⇒ A medievalist ideology unsuited to the development of balanced diplomatic relations in a regional context dominated by Pakistan-India tensions.
- ⇒ If Kabul is taken, a vague political project and almost non-existent economic prospects: 75 % of Afghan public spending comes from international support, essentially American. A halt in funding would lead to bankruptcy.
- ⇒ Human rights violations (women's rights, GLBTQ rights, religious minorities).

² Ron Moreau, "Meet the Taliban's New Chief", *Newsweek*, July 24, 2009.

³ Luc Mathieu, "Afghanistan: 'The Taliban do not want peace'", *Libération*, October 25, 2018.

⁴ Agreement signed on February 29, 2020. The Doha negotiations resumed on January 5, 2021.

⁵ "We seek an independent, sovereign, united, developed, and free Afghanistan – an Afghanistan with an Islamic system in which all peoples of the nation can participate without discrimination and live harmoniously with each other in an atmosphere of brotherhood. We seek a future Afghanistan that has positive, respectful and good relations with all its countries, regional and global" (Abdul Ghani Baradar, [Inaugural speech of the Doha talks](#), September 12, 2020).

⁶ "Interview with David Petraeus. What the Wars Taught Me", *International Policy*, no. 167, 2020, p. 178.

⁷ [Global Terrorism Overview: Terrorism in 2019](#), National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), 2020. On the American side, the hunt for al-Qaeda's leaders continues with all the more acuity as the succession of al-Zawahiri to the leadership of the al-Qaeda central is open (Warren P. Strobel, "[U.S. Operation Kills Qasim al-Raymi, Leader of al Qaeda in Yemen](#)", *The Wall Street Journal*, February 6, 2020). The Taliban continue to reject U.S. accusations of collusion with al-Qaeda (Zabihullah Mujahid, movement spokesman, *Voice of Jihad*, January 27, 2021).

⁸ Thomas Joscelyn, "[Analysis: U.S. Confirms Senior al Qaeda Leader Killed in Afghan Raid](#)", *Long War Journal*, October 25, 2020.

⁹ The *Rahbari shura*, also known as the *Quetta shura*, subordinates two councils: the *Peshawar shura* and the *Miran Shah Shura*, composed of members of the Haqqani group.

The U.S.-Taliban agreement has been widely commented on by the radical nebula, divided on the wisdom of negotiating with Washington. Al-Qaeda speaks of “victory” while dodging the question of its future relations with the Taliban if they take Kabul. The Islamic State group denounces an alliance between apostates (Taliban) and crusaders (Americans)¹⁰. The influential theorist of jihadism, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, refers to the history of Muslim prophecy to remind us that a non-aggression pact with infidels never exceeds ten years¹¹. Peace (*ahd*) is understood as a temporary state towards Dar al Islam, the house of Islam¹². Any other document (agreement, pact, treaty) is a waiting posture.

Radical Islam versus pragmatism

Radical Islam is not opposed to talks if they contribute to the security of the ummah and subject the contracting parties to Qur’anic law, as depicted by the traditional saying: “Submit (to Islam) and you will have peace”. And while the Islamic State rejects talks, convinced that its caliphal project will eventually supplant the world order, a pragmatic Salafist current is emerging, open to the geopolitics of nations and aware of the reality of power relations. The current includes Abu Mohammed al-Julani, a Syrian warlord and former professor of classical Arabic, who rose through the ranks of jihadism before founding Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the province of Idlib.

With his tangible radicalism and fierce Islamism, al-Julani stands out for his desire for autonomy. In 2013, he refused to join the Islamic State group, believing that the excesses committed in Iraq contravene the sharia. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, admitted in a surprisingly sincere letter that he received little information from the field¹³. Three years later after his refusal of the Islamic State, al-Julani broke with al-Qaeda. Indeed, the Syrian warlord conducts jihad at his convenience, without reference to anyone else.

In contrast with the Taliban’s long view and sustained ambiguous response to the U.S. haste to end the war, al-Julani is sending signals, if not of normalization, of acceptance of political time. In Idlib, a secular administration known as the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG) tackles the issues of daily life. Although disdained by the population, the body shows a willingness to share conventional societal codes. The group accepts the return of NGOs¹⁴, al-Julani speaks to think tanks and receives the international press. His fight, his spokespersons explain, must not be perceived as a threat by the West; the field of action of his fighters is limited to Syria¹⁵.

Al-Julani is careful not to proclaim a caliphate. He contains his ambitions and is patient in stabilizing a point-to-point relationship with Erdogan’s Turkey, the interlocutor of choice¹⁶ for

¹⁰ Al-Naba, March 2020.

¹¹ Abou Mouhammad al Maqdisi, “[Open Letter to the Taliban](#)”, *Jihadica*, March 1, 2020.

¹² Arab Christians call *al Ahd al qadim* the Old Testament, and *al Ahd al gadid* the New Testament. For the Jews, *ahd* is equivalent to the notion of covenant.

¹³ Thomas Joscelyn, “Analysis: Zawahiri’s Letter to al Qaeda Branches in Syria, Iraq”, *Long War Journal*, June 10, 2013. Al Qaeda will attempt a conciliatory mission by sending an emissary, Abu Khalid al-Suri, whose real name is Mustapha Setmariam Nasar, who fails to unify the Syrian radical scene. He was killed in an attack by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant in Aleppo on 23 February 2014.

¹⁴ “We are willing to facilitate the work of any organization that would like to return to work in Idlib, and we pledge not to interfere” (“The Jihadist Factor in Syria’s Idlib: A Conversation with Abu Muhammad al-Jolani”, ICG, February 20, 2020).

¹⁵ Sheikh Abd al-Rahman Atoun, head of the HTC Sharia Council: “Our group is not a threat to the West. The region needs international help to rebuild. We are the last to fight against the regime and its allies, but we will not succeed in eliminating it without help” (Edith Bouvier, “Idlib, Syrian capital of despair”, *Le Temps*, September 4, 2020).

¹⁶ NATO member, Turkey has the eleventh largest army in the world according to a Globalfirepower assessment in 2020.

expressions of goodwill: securing access to Turkish observation posts here; training in night combat for jihadists there. Unlike Daesh, which wanted to mint its own currency, the Idleb administration accepts the Turkish lira, disregarding the Syrian currency. It favors the establishment of foreign companies, mainly Turkish, in the fast-food and home-delivery sectors, thus working towards the economic normalization of a territory in search of autonomy.

Despite these decisions, one reality stands out:

- ⇒ Cornered in Idleb province, HTC has no choice but to forge alliances;
- ⇒ Any process of normalization isolates al-Joulani from his ideological family, alters his representativeness and exposes him to the risk of overflowing from his own extremities;
- ⇒ Former interlocutor of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group, the man who called al-Baghdadi “honorable sheik” is suspected of collusion. The U.S. Special Forces operation that neutralized the Daesh leader took place in an area of Idleb supposedly under HTS control.

Despite these pitfalls, the Syrian leader’s desire for normalization is being heard and is gradually becoming part of the analytical grids. After many rumors of an assault on Idleb, Moscow now believes that the current compromise will avoid further bloodshed. A Russian diplomat, Igor Matveev, suggests a four-D scenario (de-radicalization, de-ideologization, de-militarization, de-centralization)¹⁷, postulating that we are in the presence of a forty-year-old of the new Syrian generation, a warlord who understands the importance of governance issues and shows good will by fighting So Be Steadfast, an operation room of groups loyal to Al Qaeda.

Without concession

In Mali, all the actors in the conflict say they are ready for dialogue, from the military junta to Imam Dicko, the figurehead of the Islamist opposition: “We have been saying for a long time not to talk to the jihadists, but they are on the ground. So, what do we do?”¹⁸. Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg leader of al-Qaeda obedience¹⁹, also claims to ready for dialogue, while conditioning participation in possible negotiations on the departure of French forces from operation Barkhane²⁰.

Two profiles stand out from the Malian Islamist macrocosm. The first, Imam Dicko, is a strategist of the alcoves, playing with institutions by skillfully manipulating contradictions: “I am a Wahhabi”²¹ ; “I am not a Wahhabi”²². He remains silent on the project that many observers believe he has in mind: founding an Islamic republic in the Sahel. “He never talks about it, but for him it is obvious. The solution is there”, says a researcher with access to his entourage²³.

Dicko notes the ineffectiveness of fighting Salafism, which, in the name of avant-gardism, claims a monopoly on change by disregarding the experience of the Muslim Brotherhood. The latter

¹⁷ Igor Matveev, “Syrian Idlib: What’s Next”, Russian International Affairs Council, November 17, 2020.

¹⁸ “An Islamic Solution for Mali? Interview with Mahmoud Dicko”, *Politique internationale*, no. 167, 2020.

¹⁹ Iyad Ag Ghali has led the GSIM/JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) since March 1, 2017.

²⁰ Press release authenticated on March 9, 2020 on *al-Zallaqa* electronic platform.

²¹ Mahmoud Dicko, “La marche du monde”, RFI, March 30, 2013.

²² Pierre Prud’homme, “L’imam, l’expert et le diplomate. Retour sur une recherche au Haut Conseil Islamique du Mali”, *Civilisations*, no. 64, 2015.

²³ Testimony on condition of anonymity.

developed in the twentieth century a strategy matrix of time: patience, pugnacity and acceptance of political compromises to conquer power *from below*.

Any process of dialogue reinforces the role of *maâlem* (scholar), to which Dicko aspires; to be the man above the fray, the one who listens and guides. As dialogue is inherent to his perception of the office, the imam grounds his legitimacy during the summer of 2020, when chancelleries rush to his home to assess his influence on the opposition challenging power in the streets of Bamako. He talks, listens, negotiates with or without hope of results, essentially to give Islam a place in the ongoing process, demonstrating that there will be no way out of the crisis without recourse to the prophecy of Mohammed.

In contrast to the takfiri nature of the Islamic State – an inclusive dogma based on the pure and the impure that punishes those who deviate from it, Dicko recognizes the nuances and the evolving dimension of Malian society, in which he participates by using his Rolodex, built up during mediation missions. His contacts with warlords in the Sahel-Saharan region are well known, especially to the second Islamist profile supposedly open to dialogue: Iyad Ag Ghaly.

Born in the arid plains of Abeïbara, Ag Ghaly is an individual in search of his destiny. After a festive youth - poetry, vodka and bass guitar - he participated in the war in Lebanon and returned home to fight in the ranks of the Tuareg rebellion. Ambitious, he ran for the leadership of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (NMLA), and was refused the post. He hoped to be appointed *amenokal* (traditional chief) of the Ifoghas; again, he failed. Diplomacy tempted him. He succeeded in being appointed consul in Jeddah, but Saudi Arabia expelled him.

This unstable profile does not inspire confidence in France. In addition to a damning record (attacks, kidnappings, trafficking), Ag Ghaly does not show any dogmatic inflection, going so far as to stage a reunion with some of the two hundred jihadists released by the military junta in October 2020. His armed commitment is akin to a rent that ensures his subsistence and popularity among the radical underground, a negotiable package within the framework of a global settlement – for the better. A better deal in the service of his personal interests.

Negotiating with this profile of warlord raises a series of questions:

- ⇒ Which framework to choose? Bi or multilateral? Should the forum be continental, national, ethnic, or tribal? How to integrate pre-existing agreements (Algiers 2015)?
- ⇒ On what criteria should the interlocutor be approved? Radical sociology is unstable, the chains of command random. The warlord differs from the member of his shura (council), who differs from the troops or the small hands of the jihad (ammunition carriers, cooks, servants). For many of the latter, peace would mean a loss of income.
- ⇒ How to address the ostracism of groups prioritizing criminal activity? Negotiations were attempted with Boko Haram by former Nigerian President Obasanjo and Babakura Fugu (2011)²⁴, then by Sheikh Ahmed Datti, the Nigerian chairman of the Supreme Sharia Council (2012) – With no results. In the absence of a plan B, the war continues.
- ⇒ Managing surrenders. Mukhtar Robow, former No. 2 in the Al-Shabaab group, surrendered to authorities in Mogadishu in 2017. He entered the Somali political game by running in regional elections. His popularity quickly worried the central authorities,

²⁴ Babakura Fugu was the brother-in-law of Mohammed Yusuf, who founded Boko Haram in 2002, before being arrested in 2009 by Nigerian forces and then executed.

who imprisoned him at the cost of irreparable consequences. What Somali jihadist would accept a surrender today if the state did not respect its commitments?

In Bamako, mainstream strategic thinking suggests an Algerian-style way out of the crisis, similar to the Civil Concord Law, which amnestied thousands of Islamist fighters in order to settle the black decade (1991-2002). Although the initiative ended the civil war, the Islamist maquis was never eradicated. The Algerian army recently foiled an attempt to redeploy AQIM in the Jijel region (north-east)²⁵.

Another suggestion is inspired by the non-aggression pact that Mauritania is believed to have reached with AQIM, a pact mentioned several times in the press and denied as many times by Nouakchott²⁶. This de facto exemplarity, acquired at the price of doubt and suspicion, has a security record that is the envy of many states in the Sahel-Saharan zone: no attacks for ten years²⁷.

The gradation of the “unmentionables”

Islam calls *Dar al-Sulh* a peace treaty between two parties, *Dar al-Kharadj* a treaty imposed on a tributary nation, and *Dar al-Harb* hostility towards a country that contravenes Islamic values without necessarily engaging in confrontation²⁸.

The Islamist leaders who agree to negotiate truces (*hudna*, or transitory temporality) do not theorize coexistence between the monotheistic religions. There are only scattered cases of truce, a few individualities cognizant of the asymmetry of power that engulfs fighting Salafism in a spiral of violence and counter-violence that certainly responds to the duty of jihad, but is inadequate for the needs of the population: security, employment, education. De-prioritizing the “saving chaos” allows them to secure a territory or an area of influence, to give pledges to international institutions in the hope of inviting themselves to the table of the powerful and imposing their Islamist agenda²⁹.

Before elaborating a negotiation strategy, it would be appropriate to establish a gradation of “respectable” or “non-respectable” individuals and to determine the parameters – fixed? of eligibility for dialogue, in consultation with the states involved in the fight against terrorism and present a common front. To date, negotiation is less an act of power than an escape route from unsolvable conflicts. The thesis of the “asymmetrical conflict doomed to failure” is reinforced and the political credibility of governments is committed before public opinion. For the United States alone, the Pentagon has spent 850 billion dollars in Afghanistan and 24,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed or wounded. Admittedly, the initial problem has still not been resolved. NATO fears that a hasty withdrawal of the United States could lead to the formation of a new platform of armed groups³⁰.

²⁵ AFP, December 17, 2020.

²⁶ Pascal Airault, “Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz: ‘If Syria had not been destabilized, there certainly would not have been any attacks in France’”, *L’Opinion*, May 29, 2020.

²⁷ Since December 20, 2011, the day gendarme Ely Ould Mokhtar was kidnapped by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb fighters on the border with Mali, there have been no reported terrorist attacks in Mauritania.

²⁸ Islamic thought refers to the early caliphates to name *sulh* (armistice, treaty), the surrender of a non-Muslim population to an Islamic authority. *Dar al-Sulh*: the place/land/domain of the armistice. *Kharadj* (or *kharâj*) refers to the land tax paid by *dhimmi*s (non-Muslim citizens), always to the Islamic authority. *Harb* means war in the sense of “enlightened combat”.

²⁹ Sometimes in no uncertain terms. A return to the former situation for the Taliban: the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan (1992-2002). Sometimes in hidden terms. An Islamic republic in the Sahel-Saharan space for Dicko. A caliphate in the province of Idlib for al-Joulani.

³⁰ “[NATO Chief Warns of ‘High’ Price of Hasty Afghan Pullout](#)”, *The New Arab*, November 17, 2020.

France believes that negotiating with anyone who rejects the basic rules of military engagement and dialogue would be a departure from its values, engaging the country in an unstable process that could be contrary to its interests. As much as Paris can hear that the *ara pacis* (the altar of peace) may have been used in the past to establish a strategy of domination, no group is sending signals of dogmatic appeasement or renunciation of violence. Opening informal channels in this context would offer gains at the margin, increase divisions in an already fractured movement, give credit to those who have none, advocate democracy to warlords whose reference points are Islamic republics that already practice parliamentarianism (Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh).

Fragmentation of radical Islamism

While armed Islamism persists in considering negotiation only as truce or submission, successive breakdowns have led to a dynamic of fragmentation. The al-Qaeda defeat in Afghanistan has disseminated groups in the Maghreb that have plagued the Sahel³¹. The fall of Daesh has divided Africa between zones of influence. Groups like HTS are a mix of groups, subgroups, and other unstable entities³², with no indication that they share their leader's pragmatism, while they seem more concerned with perpetuating their criminal activities than participating in peace forums.

In addition to dissemination/propagation associated with fragmentation, there is another divisive factor: the ethnicity of the violence. The word "terrorist" has long essentialized the global jihadism of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Yet the current balance of power tends to limit the fighters to the societal porosities of the battlefield. Fighters blend in, ingest local despair, marry and give birth, appropriate local issues (pastoral disputes, access to land, control of wells), proclaim themselves as the assessors of an Islamist solution.

In the war on terror, are we not confronted with the Peul issue in the Macina region³³? The Tuareg issue in the Adrar des Ifoghas? The Dogon issue in the loop of the Niger? By geographical extension, does northern Nigeria not question the Sufi brotherhoods (Tijaniyya, Qadiriyya)? The integration of Iraqi tribes, the concept of the nation-state? Family-based clans and territorial cohesion in Syria³⁴? Aren't armed groups the instigators of criminal counter-societies of the triad, cartel or mafia type and become entrenched in populations that demand a just and responsible state?

The choice to formalize an analysis differential would help to categorize the radical nebula, to identify the "non-state actors" who would admit to making the distinction between the acceptable (peace) and the illusory (submission).

³¹ GIA (Algeria), GICM (Morocco), GICL (Libya). In the East, Shebbad (Somalia).

³² According to a tentative count by the author, more than 60 groups have contributed to the formation of HTS.

³³ In 2018, GSIM/JNIM issued a call for holy war to the Fulani in Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Cameroon, and Benin, making the Gulf of Guinea its strategic depth space.

³⁴ Approaching terrorism through an ethnic or tribal prism is often seen as regressive. The UN sees in it a disavowal of the concept of the nation-state, the former colonial powers a disqualification of the borders drawn in a century, the twentieth of its kind, eager to close the era of the great empires and to guarantee the populations spaces of subsistence and prosperity. African elites, for their part, know what the words "ethnicity" or "tribe" can imply in terms of denigration by a West convinced that nationalism has the virtues of catalyzing natives and non-natives in a given place.

For the time being, the lucidity of a few is insufficient to establish a global strategy. We should acknowledge the existence of timid signals from a neo-Salafist penchant, *neo* to designate a pragmatic Salafism willing to participate in the game of institutions without having the impression of deviating. Warlords understanding that the future of their project rests on good governance and the synchronization of our composite regimes, them and us. This constitutes, *de facto*, a break with the spectral discourse of the Islamic State, which, in the name of an ideal Islamic society, camps a temporal signature leaning towards brutal absolutism and paroxysmal rejection of historic times³⁵.

In the closed world of counterterrorism, there is the saying: “A bomber is a questioner”. One day it will be necessary to anticipate the vector through which radical Islamism could come to the negotiating table, namely politics. More precisely, we must be prepared to open the issues of discord that have provided the breeding ground for radical Islamism. These include the failure of states in the Sahel/Middle East, endemic corruption (5 % of financial aid to the twenty-two poorest countries goes to tax heavens³⁶) and informal negotiations that deprive local populations of legitimate debate on peaceful coexistence.

If peace must have a price, it will be this: a forthright negotiation without dodging the grey areas. This will be required well before considering a time for reconciliation.

Les opinions exprimées ici n’engagent que la responsabilité de leur auteur.

³⁵ Pierre Bousel, “Daesh, a temporal signature”, *Cahiers de la sécurité et de la justice*, Institut national des hautes études de la sécurité et de la justice (INHESJ), June 28, 2019

³⁶ Jørgen Juel Andersen, Niels Johannesen, Bob Rijkers, “*Elite Capture of Foreign Aid Evidence from Offshore Bank Accounts*”, World Bank Group, February 18, 2020.