

**THE SHAIKH GROUP
ANNUAL REPORT
2019-2020**



THE SHAIKH GROUP



THE**SHAIKH**GROUP

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FOUNDER & CEO STATEMENT



Salman Shaikh
Founder and CEO

The Shaikh Group (TSG) is a specialised peacebuilding organisation dedicated to mitigating and resolving conflict in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Our mission is to facilitate dialogue, mediation and Track II diplomacy with and among local actors, between Middle Eastern governments, as well as with key international actors. Combining bottom-up and top-down approaches to dialogue, we pursue a simple, powerful aim: empower people to make peace.

In a diverse **portfolio of mediation and Track II diplomacy work** focused on Syria, Iran, Iraq, the Gulf and beyond, we continue to explore opportunities for revolutionising the traditional mediation and peacebuilding toolbox. As a small, independent and nimble organisation with significant expertise in diplomacy and mediation in the Middle East, we are able to test **new and innovative channels of dialogue and consultation** – both open discussions and discreet processes – which we believe can play a key role in developing and realising a more hopeful vision for the region. Through our work, we aim to advance **practical initiatives and policy recommendations** that promote sustainable peace, mutual security, and shared economic prosperity. To that end, in addition to working with governments, we engage political actors, civil society, and the private sector to explore sustainable solutions to the seemingly intractable conflicts in the region, both intra-state and inter-state.

In 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, TSG made progress in a series of mediation tracks focused on sub-national governance and support for conflict prevention and stabilisation in northeast and northwest **Syria**, even as the national-level political process remained stalled. With regional tensions escalating dangerously, we successfully transitioned from an initial engagement among global powers into a full-fledged “global-regional” dialogue within our Track II **Dialogue for Mutual Security in the Middle East** – developing ideas for de-escalation that are now being considered by key regional players. TSG also expanded beyond these two core projects and is preparing to start a multi-year **Iraq Dialogue and Reform Initiative** in the fall of 2020, addressing the social divides and issues behind the protests and continued political paralysis there.

FOUNDER & CEO STATEMENT

Acutely aware of the constant need to adjust mediation efforts to the evolving nature of conflict in the region – and the challenges and opportunities of the digital space – we also launched a dedicated **Technology Tools for Peacebuilding Initiative in 2019**, which was featured at the most recent Paris Peace Forum.

This **2019-2020 Annual Report** covers activities and achievements across these initiatives from January 2019 until end of March 2020. We want to thank our supporters, without whom this work would not have been possible: the governments of Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Institut Montaigne and the Policy Center for the New South. We would also like to acknowledge the multi-year funding provided by the government of Switzerland, which has been of great assistance in covering staff costs and sustaining our work, including during difficult times. We hope that others will provide such support in the future. Finally, we also wish to express gratitude to our **Advisory Board** for their continued advice and active support across our projects.

2020 has already brought deep and potentially transformative challenges for regional de-escalation, reform and development in the years to come. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have especially acute humanitarian consequences across MENA conflict zones. With the multilateral system currently undergoing a serious “stress test”, and support for local and civil society actors further endangered, now is the time to seriously rethink and reimagine approaches to peacebuilding, to respond as effectively and considerately as possible to the challenges facing a deeply fractured and resource-drained region. In meeting those challenges, we also remain committed to seeking partnerships with like-minded organisations in areas where positive synergies are possible, and to recruiting the best people into our nimble, talented and highly experienced team.

We hope you will join us on this journey going forward.



Salman Shaikh, Founder and CEO

“Combining bottom-up and top-down approaches to dialogue, we pursue a simple, powerful aim: empower people to make peace.”

TSG SYRIA INITIATIVE

From the outset of 2019, recognising the persistent constraints to significant progress in the UN-facilitated political process, TSG initiated a shift in its long-standing Syria Initiative, away from activities taking a national-level lens, and toward a series of more targeted interventions addressing **the reality of the fragmentation within Syria today.**

That reality is one of *de facto* division, with different models of local governance prevailing within distinct zones – the northwest held by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed groups, the Kurdish-led Self Administration (SA) in the northeast, and regime-held areas.

This still fragile context entails risks of renewed conflict between and within these zones – as we have since seen with the Turkish intervention of October 2019 and regime offensives on Idlib – while also threatening to further deepen the social and political divisions among Syrians at large.

Building on previous activities – including **two intra-Syrian dialogues on decentralisation held in late 2018 and early 2019**, which brought together representatives from each of these zones – TSG steered a series of mediation and dialogue initiatives through the year that **focused on northeast and northwest Syria**, with support from donors including the governments of **Canada, France, Germany, the UK, Sweden, Switzerland and the European Union.**

“TSG processes aimed to strengthen political understandings on steps to prevent further conflict and build more inclusive and responsive governance.”

These processes aimed to strengthen political understandings on steps to prevent further conflict, build more inclusive and responsive governance, and improve Syrians’ ability to influence international approaches to stabilisation within these zones.

Northeast Track: Enhancing political inclusion to build stability

From January 2019 – and in part at the request of parties involved in its previous Arab-Kurdish dialogues – TSG convened a **series of Track II dialogues between the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) and political actors unaffiliated with the Self Administration (SA)** to develop consensus on measures to introduce more accountable and inclusive governance structures. This initiative solicited **strong interest and political backing from the US, France, the UK, and Germany**, recognising the **importance of improved political inclusion within northeast Syria** in efforts to ensure an enduring defeat of ISIS, prevent further conflict in the region, secure wider international support for stabilisation, and improve prospects for a national-level political process.

The meetings brought together a delegation composed of senior SDC figures and stakeholders not aligned with the SA, including representatives of the Kurdish National Council (KNC), the al-Ghad current and independent figures representing different societal and tribal networks and coalitions. By the sixth meeting in September 2019, these parties had collectively developed an **agreed set of core political elements for an agreement to underpin renewed governance and security arrangements**, as set out in a “Non-Paper on a Political Agreement for Northeast Syria.” These elements related to a political vision for the region, reformed security and governance arrangements, and a phased process for reaching and implementing the agreement.

“Following Turkish intervention in October 2019, TSG adapted to focus on:

1. Intra-Kurdish reconciliation and
2. Trust-building between the Self Administration and local constituencies in Arab-majority areas.”

Following the Turkish intervention in October 2019, TSG paused its wider dialogues and adopted **an approach based on bilateral consultations and diplomatic outreach with Syrian and international players**, first to assess the continued viability of previous assumptions and subsequently to advance more discreet processes that remain viable – and indeed more urgent – focused on: 1) **intra-Kurdish reconciliation** and 2) **trust-building between the Self Administration and local constituencies in Arab-majority areas**. These consultations included outreach in northeast Syria, Erbil, Ankara, Moscow, and Washington with key international and Syrian parties.

This engagement helped TSG strengthen its ties with Syrian parties, the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) and senior Turkish officials – a key audience given the central importance of addressing Ankara’s concerns as part of any stabilisation and conflict prevention effort.

Building on the initiative to support intra-Kurdish unity launched by the Syrian Democratic Forces at the end of 2019, TSG’s mediation activities among Kurdish parties and international actors demonstrated the opportunity for progress toward intra-Kurdish reconciliation and agreement on a joint political vision. Ideas emerging from these consultations and past dialogues have since helped shape the US-led intra-Kurdish talks that were launched in March 2020.

With the onset of the Covid-19 related restrictions, TSG has adapted its modalities to continue these consultations on digital platforms, while producing reports that continue to shape the efforts of international stakeholders. Thus far, these efforts have included a working paper on **framing intra-Kurdish talks**, and two detailed briefing notes on **political and security dynamics in Deir Ez-Zour and Raqqa** respectively, based on extensive interviews with key informants on the ground. These consultations have formed the basis for ongoing discussions on steps to improve the relationship and build confidence between the Self Administration and constituents in these Arab-majority areas.

From July 2019, TSG convened a **series of small workshops focused on governance in northwest Syria** (principally North Aleppo and Afrin). These conversations tackled challenges related to building a more cohesive, legitimate, and transparent governance structure, capable of serving the needs of local communities. The three workshops involved senior political opposition representatives from the National Coalition and Syrian Interim Government (SIG), Local Council members, civil society actors, representatives of Turkish-backed armed opposition groups, and governance practitioners and experts. TSG conducted further independent consultations to address certain sensitive issues and provide real-time guidance.

Northwest Track: Building the capacity and legitimacy of local governance

Participants collectively developed proposals for reforming current governance structures, as set out in a **Working Paper** which identified the need for: **more inclusive, responsive, and accountable structures**, with greater Syrian ownership; **improved coherence and coordination across Local Councils**, with a more empowered, centralised oversight body; and **more efficient and better-supported service provision** and stabilisation mechanisms.

While participants agreed on **seven strong, actionable recommendations** for responding to these needs, they differed on how best to promote reforms, given the current reality on the ground. Participants acknowledged the significant hurdles, from the dominance of armed opposition groups (AOGs), the war economy and its beneficiaries, to the numerous demands on Turkey – whose buy-in would be essential for any transformation of existing structures.

TSG shared and promoted the Working Paper outcomes with international stakeholders – including those formerly involved in, or considering renewed activities on stabilisation in the northwest – and received positive feedback. At present, TSG continues to consult with a **broad section of Syrian civil society and governance actors** through remote conferencing, to assess the impact of both the latest Idlib offensive and a potential COVID-19 outbreak on the context for these recommendations. TSG equally plans to **further engage with Turkish experts and authorities** who could make these recommendations a reality.

“– **More inclusive, responsive, and accountable structures, with greater Syrian ownership;**

– **Improved coherence and coordination across Local Councils, with a more empowered, centralised oversight body; and**

– **More efficient and better-supported service provision and stabilisation mechanisms.”**

Key Achievements

Over the course of 2019 and in 2020, TSG's Syria initiative successfully worked toward:

(1) Supporting and advancing the French-led process on confidence building between the PYD and KNC:

Convening these actors in an informal Track II space helped maintain momentum within the formal process addressing confidence building measures – on which there has since been concrete implementation. These dialogues also provided a key venue for coordinated engagement between the US, E3, and Syrian parties.

(2) Shaping a formal process to introduce greater political inclusion in northeast Syria.

The relationships and understandings built through TSG's mediation and consultations have directly contributed to shaping the prospective process on intra-Kurdish unity under the auspices of the US. TSG's engagement with key interlocutors from Arab majority areas also continues to inform approaches to addressing their involvement in the process and to introducing more meaningful political inclusion within the Self Administration.

(3) A more informed debate on governance in northwest Syria, with actionable recommendations on governance reforms.

Discussions among a spectrum of

stakeholders from within northwest Syria helped shape substantive recommendations that will be particularly relevant as the need for increased assistance – following the regime offensive on Idlib and the potential COVID-19 outbreak – refocuses international stabilisation actors on the northwest.

(4) Strengthened relationships with key Syrian stakeholders

within the northeast and northwest. TSG's engagement in northeast Syria, in Turkey and the KRG has helped build trusting relationships with Syrian actors that are proving vital in further developing and advancing its initiative. Consultations with a broadened set of local stakeholders are also helping TSG strengthen connectivity with community based and Track III stakeholders in both northeast and northwest Syria.

(5) Open channels and working partnerships with key international players.

TSG has strengthened existing partnerships with international actors – particularly France, the UK (both of which re-joined as partners funding TSG's Northeast Track in 2019) and the US. It also established stronger ties with both Turkey – and the KRG that have been critical in advancing the Northeast Track.

DIALOGUE FOR MUTUAL SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The TSG Track II Dialogue for Mutual Security in the Middle East takes an **“outside-in” approach to regional dialogue**, having facilitated a series of consultations among representatives of global powers first (Phase I, September 2018-September 2019), who are currently joined by regional actors in a “global-regional” dialogue (Phase II, since October 2019). With conflict dynamics in MENA at an unprecedented level of complexity, and given the concomitant corrosive effect on the international system, the initiative is designed to address the need for global powers (the United States, Russia, China, India and Europe) to find common ground between themselves first, before engaging regional parties with the purpose of preventing, mitigating and resolving conflict in the region. The dialogue aims to produce concrete points of advocacy for key capitals and develop building blocks towards ‘mutual security’ in the Middle East. It has been supported by the **German Federal Foreign Office** and **Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, in addition to the **Policy Center for the New South** and the **Institut Montaigne** in its first phase.

Activities in 2019 and early 2020

Over the course of **four dialogue roundtables in Phase I**, which were held in Paris, Berlin and Rabat between late 2018 and July 2019, the global power participants made significant progress from initial **trust-building** exchanges on their respective countries’ views of the MENA region today, towards clarifying their **misperceptions, red lines and obstacles** to global power cooperation. From early 2019, the participants gradually converged on the view that contradicting global power assessments of Iran’s role in the Middle East and its conflicts represented a critical consideration, and that working towards a common understanding of **Iran’s regional role** was of vital importance.

Given tensions between Iran and the US, such an effort was considered to be especially timely, in that it could help mitigate this crisis over the short- to medium-term.

“The global power participants made significant progress from initial trust- building exchanges on their respective countries’ views of the MENA region today, towards clarifying their misperceptions, red lines and obstacles to global power cooperation.”

“The “Discussion Document” – which has served as a basis for the “global- regional” dialogue in Phase II – outlines a set of measures aimed at defusing current Iran-US tensions and developing building blocks for mutual regional security arrangements.”

By the fourth dialogue roundtable, which took place in Rabat in July 2019, the global power participants developed sufficient consensus to elaborate a **sketch of short-, medium- and long-term measures** – summarised in a **“Discussion Document”** – which has served as a basis for the “global- regional” dialogue in Phase II. That set of measures is aimed at defusing current Iran-US tensions and developing building blocks for **mutual regional security arrangements**.

In a subsequent set of **preparatory consultations** (October 2019 – February 2020), marking the beginning of Phase II, TSG identified and consulted senior regional officials and experts to lay the foundations for them more formally joining the global power representatives in a structured “global-regional” dialogue.

Activities in this preparatory consultation phase included, among others, consultations with senior regional interlocutors: on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference’s “Core Group Meeting” in Cairo/Doha in late October 2019, in which TSG was a partner; on the sidelines of the Paris Peace Forum in November 2019, in which TSG was an accredited organisation; on the sidelines of the 2019 Doha Forum in December 2019; and on the sidelines of the 2020 Munich Security Conference.

With the onset of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, planned in- person activities to follow-up on the preparatory consultations were postponed. TSG adapted quickly and convened a series of **remote videoconferences** with all global power participants.

These videoconferences aimed at sustaining the momentum of Track II consultations, allowing participants from different parts of the world to exchange information and analysis, jointly assess current macro and regional developments, and further develop the concepts laid out in the “Discussion Document”. Reflecting on the short-term measures in that document, participants fleshed out recommendations related to the current COVID-19 pandemic environment, developing new ideas for addressing humanitarian needs and supporting ceasefires in Middle East conflict zones. Whenever possible, regional interlocutors were included in such consultations.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Dialogue for Mutual Security in the Middle East has continued to generate actionable recommendations through remote videoconferencing.”

Key Achievements

Over the course of 2019 and in 2020, TSG's Dialogue for Mutual Security in the Middle East successfully worked toward:

(1) **Substantive results:** The “**Discussion Document**” – which was elaborated by the global power participants over a 12-months dialogue process (Phase I) and which outlines short-, medium- and long-term reciprocal steps towards regional de-escalation and mutual security – has already proven a strong basis for engagement with regional actors and will be further elaborated.;

(2) **Good access to senior officials and experts across the region**, allowing for the beginning of a structured “global-regional” dialogue and resulting in regional parties’ agreement to participate in dedicated Working Groups;

(3) **A further strengthening of the core group of global power participants**, which has built internal trust, rapport and understanding. Continued cohesion and shared understandings within the group of global power participants are crucial to successfully developing the “global-regional” dialogue going forward; and

(4) **Pursuing partnerships**, such as with the Munich Security Conference. As Phase II of the initiative develops, The Shaikh Group will continue to explore opportunities for partnerships and positive synergies with like-minded organisations.

IRAQ DIALOGUE AND REFORM INITIATIVE

The Shaikh Group is in the process of preparing a multi-year effort to convene dialogues among a broad, politically diverse spectrum of Iraqi actors to address the roots of conflict in the country today, including the gap between authorities (central or local) and citizens, and between de facto authorities and the formal bureaucracy. The Iraqi-led initiative will be based on the idea that only a bottom-up approach can bring the peripheries and marginalised populations into a political process and sustain peace and prosperity for all Iraqis. Relevant dialogues will be **implemented by Iraqis**, and – to the greatest extent possible – **inside Iraq**, which marks an important evolution for The Shaikh Group.

The process will **go beyond past Track I and II interventions**, by 1) facilitating conversations across both horizontal (cross ethno-sectarian) and vertical (class-based) divides and 2) focusing in particular on the most underrepresented segments of society, including the economically underprivileged, protest movements, youth, and women. The dialogues will build political understandings on core issues that threaten the fragile peace, and pose persistent **barriers to reform and effective governance**. Vast parts of the Iraqi population do not feel that their governments (national or local) meet their basic needs or legitimately claim to speak on their behalf. As long as this disconnect between local constituencies and their representatives persists, the potential for further conflict remains.

The TSG project views the Iraqi state as composed of a multi-layered relationship between the executive, formal bureaucracy, de facto authorities, and society. The project will convene dialogues aimed at strengthening the connective tissue among these different entities. There are actors within each of these groups willing to engage on such a basis, in return for a greater stake in the state-building process. Dialogue and network building initiatives within this project will work toward promoting consensus-driven, inclusive approaches to reconstruction and governance/economic reform, while also providing opportunities and lessons for institutional capacity-building and technical assistance at the local level.

TSG REBUILDING IRAQ INITIATIVE

The dialogues will focus on **four axes that represent particular sources of tension** with the central Iraqi government:

1. **Basra**
2. **Baghdad (and periphery)**
3. **Recently-liberated areas/Mosul**
4. **KRG**

The project will also aim to inform the approach of the **wider international and donor community**.

For the purpose of this project, TSG is building a dedicated team to be led by Renad Mansour (Director of the Iraq Initiative at Chatham House), which will include both country and thematic experts, with significant experience in post-conflict stabilisation and reconstruction and with a track record of deep and longstanding engagement with the relevant local actors and networks inside Iraq.

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS FOR PEACEBUILDING

Around the world, conflicts are becoming more complex, more dynamic and more resistant to mediation by traditional actors such as the United Nations. Geopolitical polarisation, the proliferation of non-state actors and local parties, and the impact of transnational forces all play a role in shaping this shifting conflict landscape.

While the conflict resolution community has, over the past decade, looked introspectively at how to improve the mechanisms within the traditional peace-builder's toolbox, we are yet to fully understand how **technology can revolutionise peacebuilding efforts** and be tailored to the maximum benefit of communities affected by conflict all over the world. For instance, the availability of fast, secure online tools could open up unprecedented opportunities to connect civil society activists with each other and high-level negotiations. The need for these remote technologies to be workable in a wide variety of settings, such as conflict zones with low bandwidth or connectivity in the MENA region, is proving to be even more important today during this period of limited movement and social distancing, caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. **In short: it is high time that we put a peacebuilding perspective at the centre of the information and communication innovations of today and tomorrow.**

Across its portfolio of mediation and Track II diplomacy activities, TSG aims to maximise its impact by revolutionising the traditional peacebuilding toolbox. To work towards this goal, TSG's **Technology Tools for Peacebuilding Initiative** – established in the spring of 2019 – has invigorated the debate on the use of technology in peacebuilding mechanisms and instigated development of innovative tools to that end. TSG formed a cross-industry group (the "**Peacebuilding League**"), which has regularly convened Silicon Valley technology, venture capital, philanthropy leaders, and peace-building communities. Its purpose, as agreed by its members, has been to generate new ideas and connections to positively contribute to successful peacebuilding and conflict resolution outcomes around the world, *inter alia* by supporting the use of innovative technologies.

TECHNOLOGY TOOLS FOR PEACEBUILDING

The league has set up a leadership team, which has taken a central role in facilitating relevant connections.

In late 2019, the TSG Technology Tools for Peacebuilding Initiative was featured at the **Paris Peace Forum** as a flagship project in the “New Technologies” category, together with partner organisations **Build Up** and **Orange Door Research**. In order to further advance this initiative, we are seeking support and further partnerships with interested capitals and relevant entities and efforts, such as those advanced by the UN. TSG is eager to make its distinct contribution to an evolving eco-system of actors well-placed at the intersection between peacebuilding and communication innovations.

TEAM MEMBERS



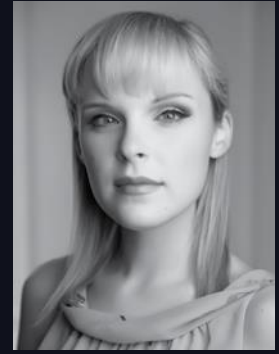
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