



RESEARCH PAPER



Checkpoints, Ma'awisley and the Political Entrepreneur

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This research is supported by the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep), funded by UK International Development from the UK government. However, the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies. Any use of this work should acknowledge the authors and the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform.

PeaceRep Somalia research aims to deepen the understanding of the country's fragmented predicament, ten years after the establishment of the Federal government and in light of the continued pervasiveness of conflict and political instability, both domestically and regionally. Our research themes include: sub-national governance through checkpoints; justice and security in Somalia; building on the Galkayo 'local' agreement; emergent conflict and peace dynamics across the Somali regions (Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya). The programme will continue to analyse and engage stakeholders around peacebuilding processes and in relation to events that unfold in real time.

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The authors are extremely grateful for the input of three anonymous reviewers.

Design: Smith Design Agency

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7488/ERA/PEACEREP-2025-004>

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Executive Summary

- ▶ Checkpoint dynamics or roadblock politics are an important lens by which to understand Somalia's political economy. Such sites of power are critical resources at the individual and collective levels for both individual political entrepreneurs as well as different forms of public authority.
- ▶ The repercussions of the now stalled government supported Ma'awisley offensive against Al Shabaab are still playing out in the country, including in the proliferation of checkpoints and insecurity in northern Hiraan region, one of the original areas in which the offensive began (over competition for checkpoint revenue).
- ▶ Public and private protests have been taking place in northern Hiraan region as a result of the expansion of unregulated checkpoints and insecurity, which affect the everyday movement of people and goods.
- ▶ Aspirant and existing political entrepreneurs utilise revenue from checkpoints as their political budget to develop or maintain a coercive capacity (e.g., a militia), obtain the support of external security actors and pursue their own political projects, raising their value in the political marketplace.
- ▶ The proliferation of checkpoints and the difficulty of addressing associated insecurity reveals the underlying fragility of 'state-building' processes in Somalia, as well as the urgent need for Federal, Regional and local actors to work together to support reconciliation and power-sharing measures.

Introduction

A focus on checkpoints remains an important lens by which to understand Somalia's political economy. Checkpoints or roadblocks are a ubiquitous phenomenon across much of the African continent, just as they are within the Somali-speaking sub-region of the Horn of Africa. Checkpoints vary enormously in their physical appearance, ranging from the clearly demarcated, militarised and physically intimidating, to others that are impermanent or mobile, and even to the 'ghostly' or invisible where no physical barrier exists, and payment is made remotely.

Checkpoints are however extremely meaningful and can inform us about state-society relations and the legitimacy and behaviour of any form of public authority that claims power and revenue from such sites. Checkpoints may be 'manned' by a varied set of actors, from different layers of the state to armed groups and other non-state actors who may, nevertheless, be acting very 'state-like'. The study of this phenomenon in Africa is generally recognised as being rather limited considering its importance to the understanding of power and state formation.¹ This is however starting to change in the Somali territories, most evidently in work led by Tobias Hagmann and Finn Stepputat, whose focus is broader, on 'corridors of power' and their state-making effects but within which roadblocks and checkpoints are salient phenomenon, as well as in the work of Peer Schouten.²

The study of checkpoints and 'roadblock politics' in fact raises questions about and shifts our perspectives from state formation as a function of the control of territory and population (particularly in its more centralised form) to the control of mobility and movement. Checkpoints are also sites of everyday violence, with one source identifying an average of one to two violent incidents at any checkpoints daily.³ One of the dimensions of checkpoint politics that is less studied is their relationship to the 'political entrepreneur', prominent individuals who are often associated with checkpoints and are the strongmen holding power behind those that work on the checkpoints. We shed some light on this dynamic.

This report focuses on Hiraan region in the Federal Member State (FMS) of Hirshabelle. The capital of Hiraan is Belet Weyn town, a major trading hub in central Somalia and a long-standing 'chokepoint' between Bosasso port in Puntland, and central and southern Somalia, as well as neighbouring Ethiopia. The report is limited, spatially and temporally, to Hiraan (particularly Belet Weyn town and district) and the period 2022 to 2024, in view of forthcoming in-depth analyses.⁴ The period in question however notably includes the Somalia government-supported 'Ma'awisley' – clan militia – offensive against Al Shabaab (AS), which began in Hiraan region and where the Hawadle clan of Hiraan played a crucial role. A further factor in security dynamics worth noting is the lifting of the arms embargo on Somalia, in December 2023, although arms were already readily available in the country.⁵ A further catalyst for this report is the lack of analysis on the repercussions of the now stalled offensive, which are still playing out including around checkpoint dynamics.

The report draws on over 30 semi-structured interviews as well as observations and discussions on the Hiraan context, conducted under the PeaceRep Somalia research theme, 'checkpoints and sub-national governance'. The report furthermore draws on a long-standing interest in and connection of the authors to Hiraan and Belet Weyn as well as research conducted under the Conflict Research Programme (CRP), one of PeaceRep's predecessor research programmes.⁶

Trade Corridors, Public Authorities and Political Entrepreneurs

The importance of trade and associated revenue collection has been critical to the emergence and evolution of different sub-national polities in Somalia over the last 25 to 30 years. In Somaliland and Puntland, the seaports of Berbera and Bosasso and their associated trade corridors provide crucial revenue for their respective governmental authorities.⁷ For the last 15 years, revenue collection at checkpoints have been the major source of revenue for the militant Islamist group, Al Shabaab, across much of southern and central Somalia.⁸

Since 2012, with the formation of the federal system in Somalia, Mogadishu and Kismayo have become ever more important sites of revenue generation in Somalia's trade-based political economy, albeit in a broader environment in which international forms of assistance and associated rents have also risen in prominence (Majid et al., 2021). While the major seaports of Berbera, Bosasso, Mogadishu and Kismayo provide the most significant prizes as trading hubs and maritime 'chokepoints', each of Somalia's Federal Member States (FMS) derives revenues from along the trade corridors within their respective territories. Over the last 10 to 12 years therefore, the evolution of new politico-administrative entities – the FMS – have been superimposed on the existing and evolving trade corridors across Somalia.

Hagmann and Stepputat identify three corridors as being of interest to their path-breaking work, a northern corridor, a central corridor and a southern corridor. We expand on this by identifying four corridors of interest:⁹

- ▶ A northwest corridor – the Berbera Corridor, through western Somaliland ¹⁰
- ▶ A north-south corridor – a Bosasso-Belet Weyn corridor ¹¹
- ▶ A central-south corridor – a Mogadishu-Baidoa corridor ¹²
- ▶ A southeast corridor – a Kismayo-Dobley corridor ¹³

There are major and minor trade corridors across the Somali sub-region, where a 'corridor' can be defined as a 'trans-boundary geographic space of economic, political and social relations in which we can observe a) the flow of commodities, capital, and people, b) the exchange of value, namely goods and credit and c) different regulatory authorities governing a) and b)'.¹⁴

These corridors hold different types of checkpoints, including seaports, cross-border (international) checkpoints and interior checkpoints. Within these broad categories further differences are evident, including official government checkpoints, unregulated militia checkpoints and Al Shabaab checkpoints (although clan and government identification or affiliation are often blurred and overlapping in practice).

A further analytical category that we draw upon is Lund's notion of 'public authority', which he uses to characterise the expression of state-like power, but where the state is not clearly identified with a typical Weberian bureaucracy.¹⁵ Lund in fact points out that many institutions in the African context have a 'twilight' character, they 'operate in the twilight between state and society, between public and private'.¹⁶ He further explains that public authority or 'stateness' can wax and wane, where state institutions are never definitively formed but the idea of the state is always present. In the case of Somalia, clan-based security and governance mechanisms are particularly important.¹⁷

Adopting Lund's notion of state-like power, de Waal has described Somalia's political-territorial condition as a 'disassembled patchwork of public authorities and political entrepreneurs', which points to the complex tapestry of political order and its intersection with powerful individuals operating within a political marketplace.¹⁸ According to de Waal, a political marketplace is a framework for understanding the intersection of money, violence and the politics of identity. It concerns the commodification and trading of political relations. This monetised, transactional politics is said to dominate and undermine institutionalised politics and therefore challenges policy driven state building agendas.

Understanding the political marketplace requires an 'appreciation of the skills and strategies required to succeed in it', typically embodied by a successful political entrepreneur.¹⁹ Such actors operate as business managers, required to understand market dynamics, particularly when it comes to buying services and loyalty. They are also proficient in the instrumentalisation of identity capital in order to frame and reframe political contests, including by evoking and mobilising identity groups and enticing support from foreign sponsors. Political entrepreneurs can access tens of thousands of dollars per week from larger checkpoints, to be used as part of their political budgets. Many such entrepreneurs are evident in the Somalia context although they, like the checkpoints we explore, vary considerably in their significance and success.

Hirshabelle and Hiraan Region

The FMS of Hirshabelle is composed of the previously existing regions of Hiraan and Middle Shabelle. It has borders with Ethiopia to the north, the FMS of Galmudug and South-West State to the east and west, and the Benadir region to the south. In political-security terms, the two dominant clans in Hirshabelle are the Hawadle and the Abgal, the former being predominantly identified with Hiraan and the latter with Middle Shabelle. Both of these larger clans have different sub-groups or sub-clans who compete for power and influence. However, as in all FMS, many other clans (and associated sub-clans) are also found in Hirshabelle, as reflected in the composition of the Parliament.

The broad division of power in Hirshabelle, as in all FMS, was initially based on satisfying the dominant political-security actors; this was initially through the Presidency being allocated to the Hawadle and the state capital to the Abgal, a split that was to be reversed or replicated in further elections. However, this arrangement was undermined in the 2020 election, where the Abgal retained the state capital and gained the Presidency, which remains a source of tension.²⁰

The Hawadle and Abgal populations primarily live along the eastern side of the Shabelle river, while other clans and population groups live alongside the river and on its western side. The Hirshabelle economy is largely based on pastoralism, agriculture and trade. Many of the clans in Hirshabelle are historically pastoralists and livestock from the state reaches the export markets of the Gulf, through both Berbera and Bosasso, as well as supplies local markets. A variety of cash crops are grown along the river, for domestic markets primarily. Food and other imported commodities have for a large part of the last 30 years primarily come from Bosasso; imports and exports therefore move through the various checkpoints in Belet Weyn district.

Belet Weyn and Jowhar towns, the capitals of Hiraan and Middle Shabelle respectively, are by far the largest urban centres in Hirshabelle, and both lie along major trade corridors; Belet Weyn's significance being in its connection to Bosasso (along the north-south corridor) and Jowhar, through its connection to Mogadishu (the central-south corridor). The major checkpoints in and close to both towns generate many tens of thousands of dollars per week in taxation revenue. However, the distribution of such revenue is extremely unclear, and is controlled by key individuals.

Belet Weyn Town

Belet Weyn is the name of both the district and the town. It is divided by the river Shabelle, both physically and demographically, as no clan lives on either side of the river. Political competition is mainly between the Hawadle who dominate the east of the river and the Gugundhabe clan grouping (Gaaljecel, Jejeele, Baadi Cadde ad Jidle) who dominate the west of the river. Both the Hawadle and the Gugundhabe are historically pastoralists who lived far away from the wetter flood plains around the river.

While Belet Weyn used to be a cosmopolitan town before the civil war, as with many towns, the impact of the war forced most of the residents to relocate to their clan's territorial stronghold or to seek refuge abroad. This meant that those clans associated with Belet Weyn saw an increase in their population. The Hawadle, as a relatively large clan, saw their numbers rise significantly in the town, including with incomers from rural areas and Mogadishu. They also benefitted militarily as they had a strong contingent in the United Salvation Congress (USC), one of the insurgent groups in the 1980s, and this inherited much of the military hardware in the area. The image of the whole of Hiraan being associated with the Hawadle has since been prominent, although with the establishment of the Federal system, the distribution of Parliamentary seats and votes has changed power dynamics. However, the Hawadle effectively has full control of the state offices and resources which often extends to international aid resources. This dynamics is not uncommon in Somalia and is replicated in other FMS in Somalia.

The Gugundhabe have established themselves on the western part of the district, protected by the river and their relatively large combined population. A few smaller clans in the northeast of the district also have full control of their villages. These include Udeejeen, Faqi Omar (Dir), Faqi Muhmed (Dir) and Rer Aw Hassan, as well as the more numerous Makanne who populate many villages along both sides of the river.

Unresolved issues around access to land, expansionist clan movements and dominance of political power and resources are common in many parts of Somalia, of which Belet Weyn is a microcosm and which play into wider political competition including in their intersection between government and AS.

The Offensive against Al Shabaab

The government offensive against Al Shabaab (AS), which began in May 2022, originated in Belet Weyn district and built on a conflict that was already developing between the Hawadle and AS. These tensions had been driven, in large part, by competition over checkpoint revenues. AS had been attempting to extend their control over checkpoints to Belet Weyn district, through an alliance with a particular Hawadle sub-clan located in the Somalia-Ethiopia border area of northeastern Belet Weyn. The AS attack on the border district of Ferfer, in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State (SRS), on 26 July 2022 was enabled by this relationship.²¹ This followed another attack on Ethiopian forces several days earlier in the border area of Bakool region in Somalia and SRS, Ethiopia.²²

As a result of these developments, the SRS administration supported and encouraged the Hawadle to turn on AS, providing some equipment and military supplies. Clan mobilisation was further enhanced by AS reprisals, including the killing of prominent elders. Where the Hawadle had previously been divided, including in their associations with AS, the clan came together around what was now perceived as a common enemy. This clan-based initiative, which became known as Ma'awisley, was supported by various official government forces and expanded to other areas of Hirshabelle and Galmudug.²³ This offensive had many supporters amongst the general public and analysts who saw it as the first serious military movement against AS. However, there were also concerns that the militarisation of clans, as happened in the late 1980s and 1990s, around the collapse of the state and the civil war was dangerous and could later foment further inter-clan conflict.²⁴

Given their position as the dominant clan in Hiraan region who were seen to monopolise international and domestic resources (and power), the Gugundhabe and other non-Hawadle clans were reluctant to join the offensive, reflecting the lack of meaningful reconciliation and power-sharing that has taken place since the civil war and under the federal arrangement. One of the main calculations and perceptions of different groups in the region was that a further empowered Hawadle may further legitimise and strengthen their hold over the region. This predicament faces many clans/sub-clans in Somalia, who have little or no ideological sympathy with AS but see them tactically as a counterbalance to a dominant clan-based competitor.

Over the course of 2022 and 2023, the Hawadle have arguably been the most successful group in fighting AS and removing them from their territory, a significant achievement. This has been aided by the initial support that they received from various government forces. However, this success has been limited to Hawadle territory. Areas to the west of the river have not been part of the offensive and remain under the influence of AS.

Checkpoints and the Aftermath of the Offensive

The most important checkpoint in Belet Weyn district is close to the town's airport. It is in Hawadle territory. Taxation of vehicles varies depending on the vehicle type and cargo. Revenues raised are significant given the traffic passing through this major trade corridor. Checkpoint revenue in Hiraan is effectively a clan resource for the Hawadle or whichever clan entity and associated strongman oversees the checkpoint. At the time of the tensions with AS, the governor of Hiraan was that person. One of the uses of funds collected at checkpoints, in addition to maintaining or expanding a personal or clan-based militia, is to buy influence over whichever foreign military actors are operational in the area (within or outside the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) umbrella), as such a relationship can enhance the power of 'political entrepreneurs' vis-à-vis their competitors.

The relative importance of checkpoint revenue as part of the political budget of such entrepreneurs requires further scrutiny, but will often be a significant factor in funding an entrepreneur's coercive capacity – their militia – and buying support from domestic or international political or security actors. An example comes from ex-President of Somali Regional State (SRS), Ethiopia, Abdi 'Iley', whose rise is in part explained by his hold over state resources and his ability to buy the support of key personnel within the Ethiopian military.²⁵ This practice of utilizing locally generated revenue to buy influence over foreign security actors to advance clan or elite interests extends to elements of the Hawadle elite in Hiraan region.

While the airport checkpoint is the main taxation point, there are many other checkpoints in Belet Weyn district, many of which collect smaller amounts of money. Many of the smaller checkpoints change hands over time as different local clans and militias rotate 'ownership' of these revenue sources. Rotation of power (and therefore access to resources) is a form of power-sharing and is a norm in Somali politics.

The incumbent governor of Hiraan at the time of the rising tensions with AS was able to capitalise on the Ma'awisley movement and the domestic and international attention and support it received at the time. As the governor, it was his checkpoint revenue that was threatened by the ambitions of AS. While, in retrospect, AS over-reached in terms of their fight for control of the checkpoint, the governor successfully portrayed himself as leading the fight against the militant group.

While the Hawadle, led by the governor, did remove AS from their territory, over time he (and the Hawadle) felt they were getting insufficient support from either the Hirshabelle government or the Federal government, in terms of funds or arms. The Ma'awisley efforts require fundraising within the clan and therefore have a significant cost for identity groups participating. This led to the governor becoming a more outspoken critic of the Federal government over time. In the personalized, transactional political marketplace that characterizes elite politics in Somalia, the increasing power of the governor and his more antagonistic position threatened other interests at State and Federal levels.

Ultimately, the governor started to withhold some of the checkpoint revenue that he had been sharing with the Hirshabelle government in Jowhar, in protest. In response, the Hirshabelle government began the process of replacing him, which in turn led to the governor declaring Hiraan region as an autonomous state or FMS, separate from Hirshabelle. This notional separation led to further splits, with the self-declared state of Hiraan state further dividing – both naming themselves as Hiraan state – as competing factions developed. The new governor of Hiraan, appointed by Hirshabelle, took over the airport checkpoint, which in turn led to competing factions increasing insecurity in the area, affecting revenue collection. Eventually Hawadle elders intervened and negotiated a division of the checkpoint revenue into three shares, divided equally between Hirshabelle and the two Hiraan state entities. In late 2023, the original governor of Hiraan was appointed as Chief Liaison in the Office of the President for the Civilian Defence Forces (an official title for 'Ma'awisley'),²⁶ in a move widely perceived as removing him from the public eye and which would, in all likelihood, have come with significant financial compensation. This set of developments reflects the dynamics of the political marketplace in Somalia, and the trajectory and ambitions of a political entrepreneur as they move from sub-national to national levels.

These emergent political divisions and the militarization of clans/sub-clans within Hirshabelle that is associated with the offensive, has led to increasing insecurity in Belet Weyn district and in many parts of Hirshabelle, manifesting in the proliferation of checkpoints over time, as these sites become a means of raising money to maintain groups of militia. A minibus driver (from the Hawadle clan) explained that checkpoints 'appear and disappear daily, all wanting money and are all threatening and dangerous.' He claims that many drivers have been killed at these checkpoints, one of the reasons why women started to protest recently in Belet Weyn. He expressed his frustration with this situation as:

'When it comes to the Ma'awisley checkpoints, you see them in large numbers, more than ten in small area, all asking for money. They have no system and no reason to be there other than robbing vehicles passing. They are collecting money for themselves, and they have no cause. For this they are similar to Hirshabelle or Hiiraan state as they do nothing that benefit the public with the money they collect. It is all for them.'

This political-security predicament is recognized to be a particularly problematic issue within the Hawadle in northern Hirshabelle State, reflecting a lack of overall leadership. The *Ugaas* (traditional leader) of the Hawadle has offered to act on behalf of the clan in order to try and provide some unity and organization, but his leadership requires a willingness from the various sub-clans to fall under his authority and guidance, which he has not yet obtained. The same minibus driver, reflected on the last two years, with the following:

'We were all with the Ma'awisley revolution but had we known that it will come to such a chaos and lawlessness, we would have never supported them. Every man with ten sons now has a checkpoint. It is pure greed and banditry.'

Checkpoints under other clans in Belet District and Hiraan region as well as under Al Shabaab are operating in a more orderly manner. The minibus driver himself acknowledges that the problem is with 'us' – referring to his own Hawadle identity. This predicament of the Hawadle is fundamental to the development of Hirshabelle as a coherent FMS. Neither the Federal Government in Mogadishu nor the Hirshabelle government in Jowhar have been able or willing to assist the Hawadle in reconciling between themselves and with others, as part of the state-building agenda.

Conclusion

Checkpoint dynamics or roadblock politics are an important lens by which to understand Somalia's political economy. Such sites of power are critical resources at the individual and collective levels for both individual political entrepreneurs as well as different forms of public authority. The repercussions of the now stalled government supported Ma'awisley offensive against Al Shabaab are still playing out in the country, are under-analysed, and include the proliferation of checkpoints and insecurity in many areas,²⁷ including northern Hiraan, as highlighted in this report. Public protests have been taking place in Belet Weyn town in acknowledgement of this development and the dangers it entails for the everyday movement of people and goods.

Aspirant and existing political entrepreneurs, in many cases, utilise revenue from checkpoints as a significant part of their political budget, which can be used for different purposes, including to develop or maintain a coercive capacity (e.g., a militia), obtain the support of external security actors and pursue their own political projects, raising their value in the political marketplace in doing so. The proliferation of checkpoints and the difficulty of addressing associated insecurity reveals the underlying fragility of 'state-building' processes in Somalia as well as the urgent need for Federal, Regional and local actors to work together to support reconciliation and power-sharing measures.

Endnotes

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- ⁹ Hagmann and Stepputat. Op. cit.
- ¹⁰ The 'northern corridor' under Hagmann and Stepputat, 2023.
- ¹¹ Linking Bosasso with Puntland, Galmudug, Hiran region and beyond.
- ¹² Linking Mogadishu with Baidoa, where Baidoa is a hub for trade on to Gedo region, Kenya and Ethiopia.
- ¹³ Linking Kismayo through Doble to markets in Kenya.
- ¹⁴ Hagmann and Stepputat. Op. cit., pp. 6-7.
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²¹ See: <https://www.fides.org/en/news/72590-AFRICA-ETHIOPIA-New-terrorist-attacks-Al-Shabab-tries-to-open-new-fronts-in-the-country>

²² See: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/somalias-al-shabaab-group-rare-attack-near-ethiopia-border-2022-07-21/>

²³ See: <https://africanarguments.org/2023/05/the-unexpected-success-of-somalias-new-fight-against-al-shabaab/>

²⁴ See reflections on the limits of clan-based mobilisation or vigilantism by Abdifatah Ismael Tahir: <https://peacerep.org/2024/09/12/al-shabaab-and-the-limits-of-maawisley-state-sponsored-vigilantism/>

²⁵ In the case of Iley this included a variety of financial sources, whereas in Hiraan region checkpoint revenue will have been one of the major sources.

²⁶ See: <https://halqabsi.com/2023/10/ali-jayte-appointed-chief-liaison-for-cdf/>

²⁷ South West State has also seen increased numbers of checkpoints (see: ACLED. 2024. State officials in Somalia crackdown on clan militia checkpoints. <https://acleddata.com/2024/09/30/state-officials-in-somalia-crack-down-on-clan-militia-checkpoints-september-2024/>)

About Us

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics, changing demands of inclusion, and changes in patterns of global intervention in conflict and peace/mediation/transition management processes.

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PeaceRep is funded by UK International Development from the UK government.



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