

RESEARCH REPORT



Market Logics, Checkpoints and Transboundary Formations: The Somali Borderlands

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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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Executive Summary

Borders and borderlands are spaces of opportunity and obstacles. Political deals and settlements in such border spaces are often shaped by diverse security, political, and identity-based logics involving an array of actors who operate across multiple scales. The Somali territories of the Horn of Africa provide such a context, where Ethiopia and Kenya have been deeply intertwined in political and security terms with Somalia over several decades. In the case of Ethiopia, this entanglement developed from the early 1990s, as the rise of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) took place alongside Somalia's emergent political order following state collapse. Kenya's involvement in Somalia is more recent and has evolved significantly over the last fifteen years, since the rise of Al Shabaab.

This report synthesises several PeaceRep studies pertinent to these border relations and that inform political dynamics across this inter-connected sub-regional space. Understanding this turbulent arena is complex but critical to interpreting peace and conflict trends as well as policy responses.

Key Findings

- ▶ The Ethiopia-Somalia and Kenya-Somalia borderlands are entangled in complex political, security and financial relations, where state and clan interests intersect and rents are extracted at key 'chokepoints' along their respective trade corridors.
- ▶ Jubbaland provides an illustrative example of this entanglement, with its shared borders and political salience to both Ethiopia and Kenya, but where local power dynamics and their intersection with the regional level have evolved differently, including along the two main trade corridors that bisect this Federal Member State (FMS).
- ▶ One of the outcomes of this entanglement has been the emergence of Somali political-checkpoint entrepreneurs, who coexist in mutually beneficial relations with their regional – Ethiopian and/or Kenyan – security 'partners'; chokepoints, whether the major seaport of Kismayo or the lucrative checkpoint at Dolo town, contribute significantly to the political finance that enable such entrepreneurs to establish and maintain power and navigate political and security relations in this interconnected Somali sub-region.
- ▶ As well as a market logic that informs these political-security arrangements, political-checkpoint entrepreneurs embody identity-based political projects, at the local and/or at the sub-regional level.
- ▶ The salience of chokepoints and the mutually constitutive relations between domestic political-checkpoint entrepreneurs and regional security actors reveals the underlying fragility of 'state-building' in Somalia, the fragmentary forces at play and alternative political projects which may be characterised as 'transboundary formations'.

Recommendations

- Understanding the alignments between local political entrepreneurs and regional security actors is critical in illuminating Somalia's underlying political economy and security arrangements and in informing centre-periphery political dynamics; chokepoint or checkpoint revenue is a critical source of political finance in this regard, including in the border regions.
- It is important to recognise that policy positions and political behaviour at central levels amongst regional state actors i.e. at Addis Ababa and Nairobi, may be influenced by financial incentives generated at local levels in Somalia, for example, in Kismayo and Dolo town in the case of Jubbaland.
- Policymakers and analysts must consider the proliferation of brokers, often with competing interests, who operate both locally (within Ethiopia and Kenya) and across Somalia's sub-regions, and which is an outcome of an expanded transactional logic across this territorial space.

Introduction

Ethiopia's political and security influence and entanglement in Somalia have been highly consequential since the early 1990s. Engagement was initially driven by the Tigrayan-led Ethiopian Peoples' Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), in Ethiopia. This relationship evolved after Somalia's central state collapsed and as its fragmented political order emerged thereafter. This complex entanglement reflects the vast border area that separates the two countries, and which has included a range of sub-national political authorities over time. Kenya's entanglement is more limited temporally and spatially than Ethiopia's, given its later interventionist engagement (from 2010) and its more limited border region. It has however deepened over time and since the rise of Al Shabaab. Ethiopian and Kenyan interests in Somalia intersect in the FMS of Jubbaland, given its borders with both, and where a broad Ogaden identity and politics connects the three countries.

The Somali-speaking Horn of Africa is a deeply interconnected economic area, with Somalia's seaports connecting distant markets in the Gulf and Asia with the Somali populated hinterland and beyond. The 'chokepoints' associated with these trade corridors, whether at the seaports themselves or along the various roadblocks or checkpoints along the interior trade routes are critical sites of power and resource accumulation. As such, they attract and empower political entrepreneurs and domestic and regional security actors.

This paper brings together several studies conducted under PeaceRep Somalia and which speak to the intersection of economic (trade) and security interests within this broader borderland space, with a focus on Jubbaland.¹ Hagmann and Stepputat describe this political and economic space, using the term Somali East Africa, as a 'complex patchwork of 'trading states ... de facto states, de jure states, national - including Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti - and sub-national state entities'.² A similar characterisation, though driven from a distinct but overlapping analytical perspective – the political marketplace – emanates from Alex de Waal, who describes Somalia, as a 'disassembled patchwork of public authorities and political entrepreneurs'.³ De Waal presents Somalia's contemporary predicament as comprising an 'arena of diverse actors that combine security, governance and commercial roles, connecting the local, national and transnational', framing this as a contest between the Islamist group, Al Shabaab, and a global security assemblage.⁴ Given this commercial and security arena, we bring attention to the politics of roadblocks or checkpoints, where 'politico-military actors of all stripes focus their efforts' and 'finance their exploits'.⁵

In this synthesis, we build upon the above analytical reference points, within a larger framing of borders and borderlands as spaces of opportunity and obstacles, where resources – political, financial, identity-based – can be extracted.⁶ In these spaces relationships evolve amongst an array of actors operating across multiple scales. We bring our empirical focus to the border polity of Jubbaland, through which two major trade corridors pass and in which two prominent political-checkpoint entrepreneurs have emerged.

We begin by outlining the migration history of the two major identity groups in Jubbaland, the Ogaden and the Marehan, in order to position both within Somalia and the Somali-speaking sub-region. We then present the trade and security context and dynamics pertinent to Jubbaland, with a focus on two key chokepoints in this FMS, that are key sites of trade rents and political-checkpoint entrepreneurs. Finally, we provide some concluding thoughts.

Migration

Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya are intimately connected through Jubbaland and the migration history of lineages within the Ogaden clan family. The Ogaden are considered the largest single identity group in Middle and Lower Juba regions of Jubbaland and have significant populations in Somali Regional State (SRS), Ethiopia as well as in North-East Kenya.⁷ The Marehan are identified with Gedo region, in Jubbaland, as well as the FMS of Galmudug and, while present in Ethiopia, are a much smaller identity-based population at a sub-regional level compared to the Ogaden.

In the case of the Ogaden, this geographic positionality is accompanied by a political salience where the Ogaden have embodied a militarised resistance to Ethiopian imperialism for many Somalis, through the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). This militarised identity has evolved over time, where the ONLF is no longer engaged in armed conflict, but where the legacy of armed resistance remains alive amongst different audiences, Somali and non-Somali, in the region. Historically, members of this broad clan family expanded from the SRS in Ethiopia to their present-day position in the Somalia-Kenya border areas during the 18th and 19th centuries.⁸ Further migratory waves have taken place since, including from SRS to Somalia due to the 1977/78 Ethiopia-Somalia war (also known as the 'Ogaden' War) and from Somalia to Kenya as a result of the Somalia civil war and drought in the early 1990s; much of the population displaced from SRS to Somalia in the 1970s were part of the later displacement to Kenya.⁹

Dadaab refugee camp, in Garissa County, Kenya, has become a significant urban centre over time and is associated with the Ogaden. It was created due to the refugee influx from Somalia in the early 1990s and has been an important place of refuge for many Somalis, as well as a hub for further migration.¹⁰ Ogaden Somalis from the SRS (and Somalia) have greatly benefitted from these transborder connections as Kenya has provided a critical outlet and escape from the oppression and violence associated with the counter-insurgency campaigns of the Ethiopian federal government, particularly from 2007-2018.¹¹ Kinship ties on either side of the Kenya-Somalia border have strengthened further since the collapse of the Somalia state as trading relations and cross-border mobility changed.¹²

The Marehan have a very different migratory history to that of the Ogaden. This broad identity group is associated with Galgadud and Mudug regions (now the Federal Member State of Galmudug) in central Somalia as well as Gedo region in present-day Jubbaland. Particular subclans of the Marehan migrated from central regions to Gedo during the 19th century, with some moving on to the Negele area of present-day Ethiopia. This movement took place in three main waves.¹³ The first wave, between approximately 1880 and 1910, consisted of armed and mounted men and members of the Dervish movement. A second wave took place from around 1910, which was associated with the defeat of the dervish movement. The final wave took place after the collapse of the Somali state in 1991.

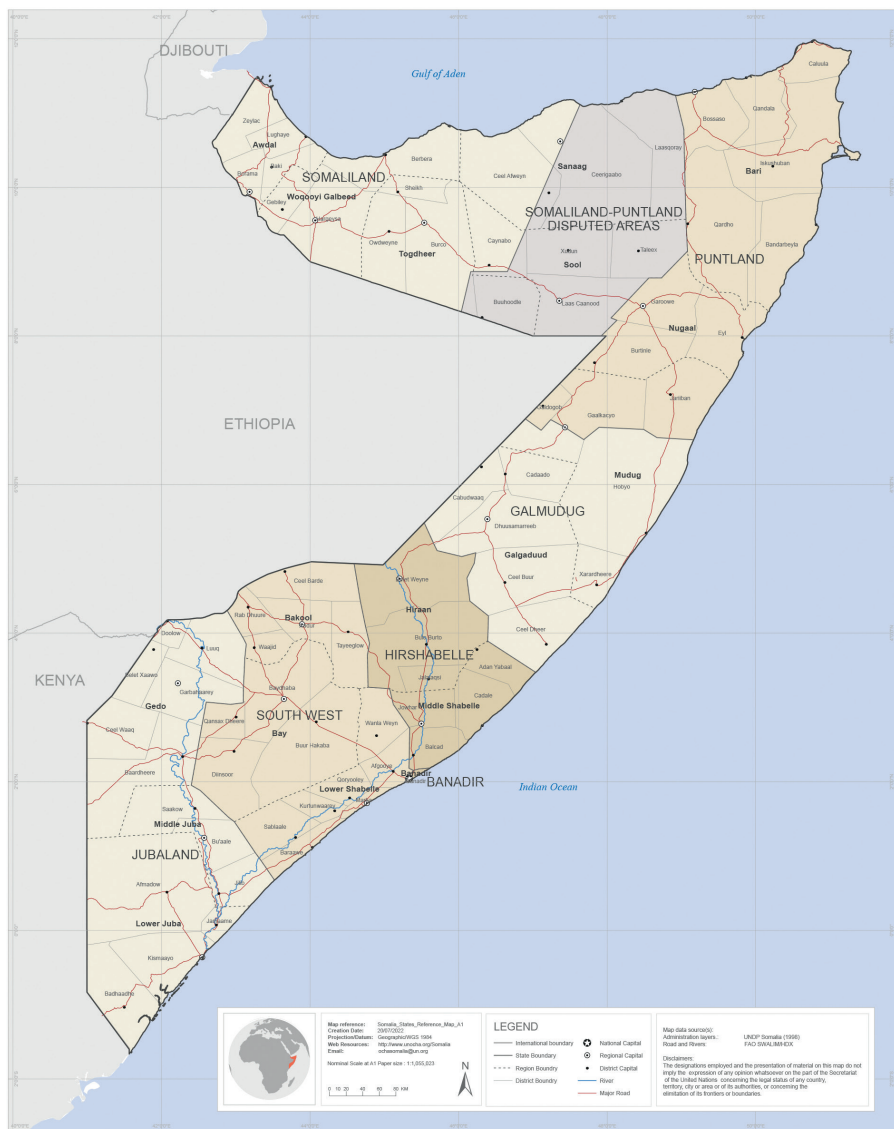
The people of the second wave are referred to locally as Galti (strangers, newcomers, or guests), while those who preceded these waves are classified as Reer Guri (the family of the house or local inhabitants). The competition between these two groups – Galti and Guri – continues today and is the basis of many political fissures within the Marehan.¹⁴ The last movement, during the civil war, involved the flight of many Somalis from Mogadishu in particular, and was part of major demographic shifts throughout central and southern Somalia that took place at the time. Many Marehan clan members fled from Mogadishu to Gedo (and Kismayo) during the civil war, as central regions (Galmudug) were not easily accessible then due to the war.

These different territorial patterns and regional migration histories inform the respective political salience of Ogaden and Marehan identity groups today, at the regional, national and local level.

Trade and Security

As indicated previously, the Somali territories of the Horn of Africa comprise an interconnected economic and trading area. The social infrastructure that enables this integration is based on a common language, religion, and culture.¹⁵ As a result, since the collapse of the Somalia state in the early 1990s, Somalia has been characterised as 'an entrepot economy' for large parts of the Horn of Africa and beyond'.¹⁶

While the four major seaports – Berbera, Bosasso, Mogadishu and Kismayo – mark critical chokepoints of considerable geopolitical significance, we focus attention on the two major trade corridors that run through Jubbaland, one that connects Mogadishu's seaport with northern Gedo (and the towns of Dolo, Luuq and Belet Hawa) and therein to markets in both Ethiopia and Kenya. The second connects the seaport of Kismayo with Garissa, Nairobi and further markets within Kenya. Checkpoints proliferate along these corridors where rents can be extracted from the passage of goods and people. For the purposes of this report, we focus on Kismayo, as the major hub (seaport) in southern Jubbaland (and its de facto capital), and Dolo town and checkpoint as the major hub in northern Jubbaland (Gedo).



Note that boundaries and territorial control remain contested between North Eastern State, Somaliland and Puntland within the areas marked 'disputed territories'.

One of the functions of these checkpoints is the role they play in generating revenue, including in the form of discretionary or political finance for those who control them. The Somalia-Ethiopia war (1977-78) led to an expansion of checkpoints in Somalia which were used to help finance the war and which, after the war became sites where President Siad Barre regime exerted pressure on rebelling groups.¹⁷ This continued during the 1990s, following the collapse of the state, with checkpoints proliferating further along many trade routes, and where a militarised clan authority replaced that lost by the state's disappearance. More recently, checkpoints have gained interest as sites of revenue generation for Al Shabaab.¹⁸ Most recently, in 2022, the politics of checkpoints was again highlighted, as the government offensive against Al Shabaab was catalysed by competition over a key checkpoint in the northern areas of the FMS of Hirshabelle.¹⁹

Kismayo

During much of the 1990s and early 2000s, following the collapse of the state, the seaport and town of Kismayo was highly contested, competed over by different factions that had previously fought the central government, including the Somalia Patriotic Movement (SPM) and the Juba Valley Alliance (JVA).²⁰ While different clan identifies were associated with these groups, the Ogaden were not prominent amongst them; an SPM-Ogaden faction did not maintain a prominent position after 1993.²¹

However, while marginalised in Kismayo town, Ogaden militia still controlled much of the surrounding countryside, in Lower and Middle Juba regions, and remained a potential military threat to groups in the town.²² In the 1990s, Kismayo was considered very unstable and violent, described for its 'fragile mix of political, militia and business actors that share a common interest – generating and using income from the 'taxation' of port and airport activities.'²³

In 2006, the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) pushed out the JVA, utilising the *Mu'askar Ras Kamboni*, an Ogaden militia. Current Jubbaland President, Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madobe', the deputy leader of *Ras Kamboni* at the time, became the Governor of Kismayo under this alliance.²⁴ The brief rule of the ICU was ended by the Ethiopian invasion of late 2006, whereafter Al Shabaab emerged as the dominant Islamist actor, as it remains today.

Al Shabaab had formed an alliance with Ahmed Madobe and his *Ras Kamboni* forces, as part of reclaiming Kismayo, however this alliance weakened and Al Shabaab took full control of the town, seaport and much of Lower Juba by 2010²⁵, benefiting from the checkpoint revenue available.

The emergence of Jubbaland

Al Shabaab's evolution as a powerful actor in Somalia, including in the border areas with neighbouring Kenya, led the Kenyan government to engage more seriously in Somalia, where it had previously had a much less interventionist position, unlike Ethiopia. Kenya's interest developed through IGAD (Inter-governmental Authority on Development) and included an idea to help support a regional administration in Somalia in present-day Jubbaland.²⁶ It also involved a military alliance between the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF) and Madobe's *Ras Kamboni* group, who were to take over Kismayo from Al Shabaab – Operation *Linda Nchi*.²⁷

Kenya's interest was pursued through Yusuf Haji (2008-2013), the Kenyan Defence Minister at the time, and Somalia's Minister of Defence, Mohamed Abdi Mohamed 'Gandhi' (2009-2010). The two are closely related by lineage. Ogaden-Somali elites have had growing influence in the Kenyan state over many years.²⁸ Gandhi was initially the leading candidate to head up an administration of some kind in what became Jubbaland, that would be supported by Kenya.

Kenya's decision to invade Somalia in 2011 was complex and included personal and institutional factors alongside national security interests.²⁹ A general area of agreement amongst the various Kenyan stakeholders was the need to support a more friendly Somali political order across the border.³⁰ However, motivations also involved supporting Ogaden clan interests in Jubbaland, given the commercial potential of Kismayo.³¹ These financial interests help to explain the longevity of the KDF in Kismayo.³² President Ahmed Madobe, who ultimately controls Kismayo, utilises this revenue as part of his political budget, including in buying support through various political and security channels and within a transactional logic that is part of the wider Kenyan and Somalia political landscape.

Dolo

While the ICU and Al Shabaab were involved in Kismayo, hundreds of kilometres north, on the border between Ethiopia and Somalia (in northern Gedo), relationships between Somali local political entrepreneurs and Ethiopian security actors were also evolving. These were focused around the local strongman in this area, Abdirashid Abdinuur 'Janaan', who was cultivating relations in the area, including with Ethiopian security forces following their development of northern Gedo as a security buffer zone. Janaan was able to realign clan relations with Ethiopia, advancing his subclan into a favoured position. Ethiopian security interests in buffer zones became a political resource for competing local groups in Somalia. Janaan developed these relations and was further able to draw on another emergent Somalia political entrepreneur, in Ethiopia, the SRS President at the time, Abdi Mohamoud Omar 'Iley', who was well established in Ethiopia's security apparatus.

Janaan, through this alliance, was able to cement his authority as District Commissioner (DC), in Dolo town, which in turn gave him control of the key checkpoints in the area. He expanded his control over the district council and created his own police force to secure the city. This enabled him to monopolise rents from the major checkpoints in northern Gedo. Janaan later benefitted considerably, in financial terms, from the humanitarian response to the 2011 famine.³³ The political budget held by Janaan helped to buy influence and support amongst Ethiopian security actors.

As Jubbaland was being negotiated into existence in 2011/12, as an FMS, the powerful Ogaden elites who were focused on Kismayo and its trade corridor to Kenya, were also required to incorporate Gedo region and its Marehan identity and interest groups into the new FMS. Janaan became one of the key symbols of this incorporation as the political figurehead for Gedo region. This was enabled by the relations he had established with Ethiopian security actors in the area. He remained in this position, from the establishment of Jubbaland until the change of regime in Ethiopia and the election of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed 'Farmajo' in Somalia. He was arrested in 2018.³⁴

Conclusions

Borders and borderlands are recognised as spaces of both opportunity and obstacles, where a range of resources can be extracted by collective and individual actors. In this paper we highlight the political, financial and identity-based resources that are mobilised through the intersection of actors – state and non-state – and interests in the Ethiopia-Kenya-Somalia border space, and in the context of Somalia's political settlement and its statebuilding logic.

These relationships are particularly evident along the key trade corridors that bisect Jubbaland and that constitute both commercial and security spaces. The 'chokepoints' – Kismayo and Dolo – represent rents and sources of political finance for local political-checkpoint entrepreneurs. The two cases briefly described above, at Kismayo and Dolo, illuminate the role of two such entrepreneurs, one who has remained in place, as a dominant actor (the Jubbaland President) since the establishment of Jubbaland itself. The other (Abdirashid 'Janaan') was a key component in Jubbaland's initial establishment, as a symbol of Gedo's territorial and identity-based incorporation into the FMS. President Ahmed Madobe has managed to navigate Ethiopia's changed position towards Jubbaland, since the change of regime in 2018, as well as other pressures from Mogadishu, while Janaan did not.

An alternative view of Jubbaland is of a 'transboundary formation', a function of the power, resources and relationships – its maritime seaport, trade corridor and the transborder Ogaden – it embodies; less a periphery of the centre in Somalia's federal system, but as a transboundary political construction in itself.³⁵

Endnotes

¹ The specific papers that inform this synthesis are: Majid, Nisar and Khalif Abdirahman. 2025. "Gedo, Jubbaland and the Translocal Marehan." Research Report. LSE-PeaceRep; Majid, Nisar, Abdirahman, Khalif, Adan, Guhad and Juweria Ali. 2026. "Ethiopia and Somalia's Political and Security Entanglement." Research Report. LSE-PeaceRep; Majid, Nisar and Khalif Abdirahman. 2026. "Somalia's Fragmented Logics of Public Authority and Transnational Conflict", *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*; Majid, Nisar, Abdirahman, Khalif, and Guhad Adan. "Checkpoints, Macawisley and the Political Entrepreneur." Research Report. LSE-PeaceRep.

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¹⁴ The use of Galti and Guri is sometimes limited to the pre and post-state collapse period, but can also be extended historically, see: Menkhaus, Ken. 2002. "Political Islam in Somalia." *Middle East Policy*, 9 (1): 109-123.

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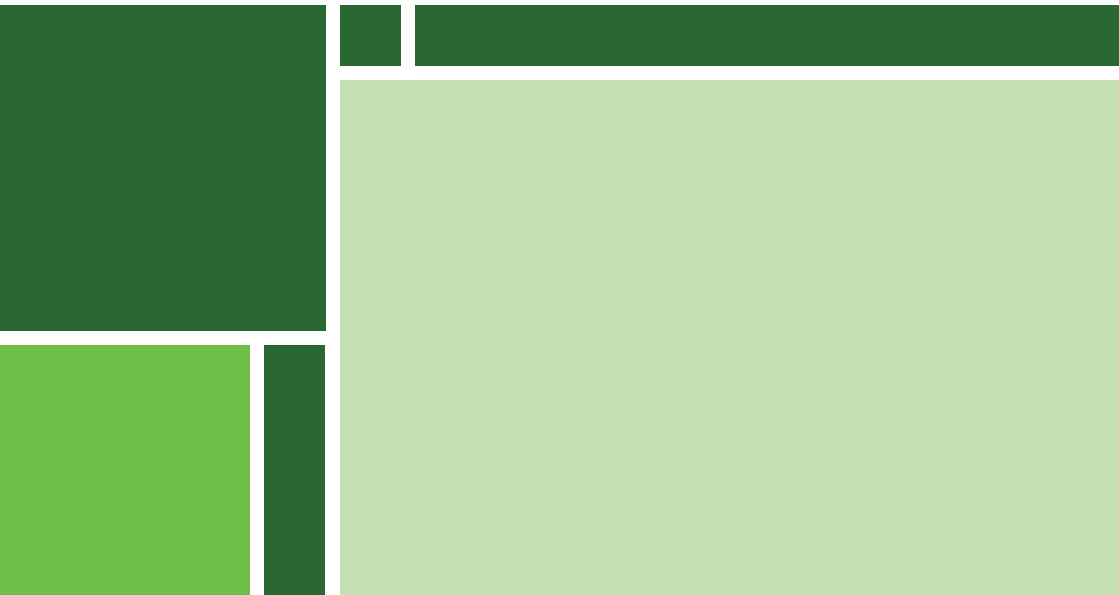
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