



BUILDING ON THE GALKAYO AGREEMENT

Mitigating Revenge Killings

Policy Brief

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Khalif Abdirahman

Nisar Majid



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Conflict & Civicness Research Group

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Authors: Khalif Abdirahman, Nisar Majid

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, The University of Edinburgh
Old College, South Bridge
Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566
Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005
E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org

Twitter: @Peace_Rep_
Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/PeaceRepResearch>
LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/peacerep/>

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The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep) is a research consortium led by the University of Edinburgh Law School. Our research is rethinking peace and transition processes in the light of changing conflict dynamics in the 21st century.

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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About the Authors

Dr Nisar Majid began working in and on the Horn of Africa, particularly the Somali-speaking regions, in the late 1990s. His work has covered food security and famine, humanitarianism, political economy analysis as well as Somali transnationalism. He co-authored the book 'Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011/12', and is engaged on a regular basis in the policy and practice fields in Somalia. He was the Research Director (Somalia) at the LSE Conflict Research Programme from 2018-2021 and currently holds the equivalent position at its successor programme, the Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform (PeaceRep). He is a Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute.

Khalif Abdirahman has been working in voluntary and professional capacities with Somali communities in the UK and the Horn of Africa over the last twenty years. He was one of the core field researchers for the book, 'Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011/12'. He was Senior Field Researcher on the LSE Conflict Research Programme (Somalia) from 2018-2021 and holds the equivalent position at PeaceRep. He has conducted research across the Somali regions for the last seven years including for Tufts University, the Rift Valley Institute and the Overseas Development Institute. He is a Fellow of the Rift Valley Institute.

Summary

- In 2017, a highly significant peace agreement was signed in Galkayo, following two to three years of recurring violence and negotiations. This agreement was an example of successful Somali activism and peacemaking alongside appropriate support from regional and international stakeholders. The agreement took place within the early years of the broader statebuilding process in Somalia, following Somalia's international recognition. The political, economic and social trajectory of Galkayo has generally been positive since the agreement.
- Since late 2022, threatening this agreement and the positive momentum witnessed in Galkayo, a series of revenge killings has been taking place in and around the town, involving populations from across its north-south dividing line, as well as populations solely from the north. These are the worst escalations of violence in the city since the 2017 agreement and reflect the limitations of governance and the underlying risk of further conflict.
- This briefing highlights the recent cases of revenge killings and discusses some of the emerging issues, including the competing roles of government and elders, and the significance of 'drunkards' (known as '*cabtoy*' in Somali) and WhatsApp groups linking local and diaspora populations, where grievance narratives are perpetuated and funds raised. Such groups may include hidden Al Shabaab elements.
- Galkayo has a number of prominent individuals and peace activists from different walks of life that continue to be engaged in and outspoken about peace and conflict dynamics in the town and wider central regions. This includes active elders, women and youth. Some of these figures have become targets for revenge killings but remain an important force for peace.
- Galkayo's position as a border town, relatively distant from the Puntland and Galmudug capitals, contributes to its marginality in relation to matters of governance. Governmental authorities and elders have shown a limited willingness or authority to engage in addressing these outbreaks of violence, in an area of Somalia that is recognized as central to elite political competition but where militarized clans dominate security.

Introduction

The global landscape of conflict and peace-making has shifted since the end of the Cold War, where today's conflicts are characterized for their complexity, the proliferation and fragmentation of actors, a mixture of political and criminal violence, intensified geopolitical and regional involvement, and the presence of ideological and identity-based conflict. Given this context, linear and binary approaches to conflict resolution are challenged and distinctions between 'inter-state' and 'intra-state' conflicts between two (or more) contestants have become blurred. This has led to the 'local turn' in peacebuilding, and the necessity of engaging with local actors, structures and dynamics. The 2017 Galkayo agreement was an interesting and generally positive example of such an engagement but remains underappreciated or utilized in wider policy and practice in Somalia.¹

Following two to three years of negotiations and periodic outbreaks of conflict, the 2017 Galkayo agreement has been an important success story in Somalia's social and political history. The cessation of hostilities from 2017 has seen improvements in social relations, economic investment and north-south cooperation on policing and security.

However, while the Galkayo agreement remains a major success story, the resulting peace has always been fragile. In February 2023, following a research visit to the town, and in a largely positive reflection of developments in the town, PeaceRep's Khalif Abdirahman cautioned that,

'The city is still vulnerable to revenge killings, as both authorities are weak in policing and dealing with murder cases effectively. Murderers seek protection from neighbouring clans, and without effective policing and thus justice, the whole clan is targeted by the victim's clan members, causing recurrent clan conflicts and creating an environment of fear and insecurity across the town'.

Unfortunately, this cautionary note became reality weeks later as a series of revenge killings took place involving different groups. This policy brief explores the issues behind these cases.

¹ Majid, N and Theros, M. (2022), Galkayo, Somalia: bridging the border, *Peacebuilding*, 10:2, 172-188.

Background

Galkayo town, in central Somalia, lies at the physical, political and cultural centre of Somalia. It is a border town, divided between its northern and southern portions by the 1993 Mudug Peace Accord; that division marked a prolonged ceasefire between populations from the North and the South, but over which there was little social interaction.² The North-South division marks a border between two major clan families (Darod and Hawiye), two powerful sub-clans (Mijerteen-Omar Mahmoud and Haber-Gedir-Sa'ad) and two Federal Member States (FMS). A third Darod clan, the Lelkasse, based in the north, are also prominent and heavily involved in current tensions. Other clans, such as the Dir, the Sheekhal and the Marehan also reside in the town.

The Accord was best characterised as a truce or ceasefire as it did not involve a deeper reconciliation process between the divided communities. The border involved a physical barrier with guarded checkpoints but is also imbued with social and psychological dimensions, reflecting the troubled history of the area and its unreconciled character, which continues to be animated by public and social media.

Galkayo is a major transport hub, on the road linking the port of Bosasso with markets in central and southern Somalia. As such, it is an important site of revenue collection for both Puntland and Galmudug government authorities.³ A key underlying tension that affected relations across the town was the uneven pace and level of development on either side of the border, where the more stable northern Galkayo benefited from the relatively better diaspora and business investment in comparison to the south. This imbalance influenced the 2014-17 conflict but has markedly changed as Galmudug has become a Federal Member State (FMS) and investment in Galkayo South increased. The lessons of the Galkayo peace agreement process were captured by the authors in their previous work.

Given this history and the relatively peaceful environment from 2017 to early 2023, the following section explores the more recent episodes and escalation of violence.

² Majid and Theros, op. cit.

³ Abdirahman, K. (2012), *Contested Commerce: Revenue and state-making in the Galkayo borderlands*. RVI. (see: <https://xcept-research.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/RVI-2021.11.23-Contested-Commerce-1.pdf>)

Recent Developments: Revenge Killings

The incidents presented here are narrated in fuller detail in a separate report.

Across the town's north-south faultline

The most worrying dispute and series of revenge killings concerns two of the three most prominent clans of Galkayo, the Lelkasse from Galkayo North and the Sa'ad from Galkayo South. Conflict between these two has the potential to draw in the Omar Mahmoud from Galkayo North and therefore lead to war between the two FMS (or their constituent clans).

Following the 2017 Agreement, the Saad and the Lelkasse clans of Mudug region signed the Bandiiradely Peace Accord (13 June 2020)⁴, instituting capital punishments for murder cases between the two clans; such punishments serve to settle disputes without reverting to expensive *diya* compensation mechanisms.⁵ This accord symbolized a further commitment to peace in this area, following the 2017 Galkayo agreement. It was organised and sanctioned by both Galmudug state and Muslim scholars. One of the fruits of this accord was to create a positive social atmosphere between the two clans. Members of the Lelkasse were also included into the Galmudug state apparatus including the police force which took in thirty officers from the Lelkasse clan (even though they are identified with the Darod and Puntland), an initiative important symbolically as well as practically (in terms of employment).

Following this accord, while some inter-clan killings did take place between the Lelkasse and the Sa'ad, in 2020 and 2021, but the resultant tensions were contained, seemingly representing the value of the 2017 Agreement and the 2020 Bandiiradely Accord. However, the exact terms of that accord were not followed as immediate capital punishment was not enforced.

However, in 2023, violence between the two clans escalated seriously, through several incidents. As revenge killings escalated, abuses of government authority took place and cases of misinformation and mistaken identity led to other sub-clans becoming involved. Efforts by elders and government authorities did take place but these incidents were developing at the same time as pre-election processes (and tensions) in Puntland were ongoing and which served to focus attention on Garowe and away from Galkayo, while in in Galmudug, attention was focused further south on the offensive against Al Shabaab (AS).⁶ However, local clan militias and associated social groups were ultimately proving to be more powerful than any other authority in the town.

Galkayo-North Incidents

While the Lelkasse-Sa'ad dispute was taking place other revenge killings have also been taking place involving different clans in Galkayo North, reflecting wider inter-clan tensions, revenge killing and the difficulty of containing them. One such series of incidents took place between the Lelkasse and the Reer Ba'idyan. The Reer Ba'idyan are a sub-clan of the Mijerteen of Puntland, with a presence in and near Galkayo town. In

⁴ PDRC (2022), *Assessment of Lelkasse and Sa'ad Conflict and Peace*. (see: <https://pdrcsomalia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/final-version02.pdf>)

⁵ *Diya* refers to blood money, for which there are standard (but negotiable) rates for compensation for injuries and killings.

⁶ Some observers suggested that the fact that Sa'ad militia were involved in fighting AS might have mitigated more severe escalation of conflict with the Lelkasse.

March 2022, a disagreement between two *cabtoy* resulted in the death of a Reer Ba'idyahan clan member, in Goldogob. A revenge attack took place two months later in which an employee of Galkayo local government was killed. The case was discussed by the elders who agreed to pay *diya* for the concerned cases. Several months later, in December 2022, another Reer Ba'idyahan *cabtoy* was killed by his Lelkase *cabtoy* friend, in Garsoor neighbourhood of Galkayo North. This case was never resolved, and the assailant escaped. Between March and August 2023, several further incidents and revenge killings took place between the two clans, including around land disputes, the 'gatekeeping' of an Internally Displaced Person's (IDP) camp and further incidents between *cabtoy*.

A second series of disputes took place between the Reer Mahad (Mohamed Saleban) and the Reer Ba'idyahan. This began in November 2022 and concerned disputed land. Representatives of the two clans clashed, with men from both sides killed. Initially this was dealt with by the government who brought in soldiers to the land in dispute. However, later in the month two Reer Ba'idyahan businessmen were killed from different sub clans (of the Reer Ba'idyahan). The government sent the police commander from Garowe and reinforcements to implement a curfew and checkpoints in the city to prevent the conflict from spreading.

Later, in January 2023, another incident between *cabtoy* from both clans led to further killings, which were not resolved, causing further escalation. Reer Mahad elders arrested the assailant who was an infamous man who had killed many people before – known as a local 'hitman'. The Reer Mahad and Reer Ba'idyahan then set down to discuss the cases they had but were unable to agree (including on past killings) and the talks faltered. In an incident that went viral on Somali social media, in September 2023, a Reer Ba'idyahan gang targeted and killed a well-respected young doctor who was also a peace activist.⁷ This took tensions to a new level with many people leaving the town, impacting the economy, business activity and services.

⁷ Horn Observer, 2023 (see: <https://hornobserver.com/articles/2446/Local-doctor-shot-dead-by-gunmen-in-central-Somalia-town>)

Discussion

A number of themes have been identified from these cases.

1. The power of *cabtoy* and Whatsapp groups

Revenge killings take place and escalate for many reasons and are found in many cultures. In Somalia they are associated with a pastoral culture in which customary norms have been codified into *diya* compensation which in itself reflects the organization of society into lineage units. One of the main roles of clan elders is to intervene quickly when incidents take place, in order to mitigate their escalation. This takes place by engaging the clan elders of the opposing party, offering condolences and beginning the process of negotiating *diya* or other payments. One of the fragilities of peace in Galkayo town is that incidents that take place in rural areas, amongst pastoralists, can lead to revenge killings or threats of such killings in town. The Galkayo agreement-making process was cognizant of this and had an outreach capacity to involve and engage pastoral populations so that they were aware of and involved in the agreement making process.

However, the cases presented here generally originated in town, and clan militias and various town-based *cabtoy* or 'drunkards' have been playing a central role. Our research reveals that these *cabtoy* are part of wider social networks and relations, both in the region and in the diaspora; they are part of WhatsApp groups for example, that link different people in multiple sites, and are reported to include truck drivers in the USA and even some women's groups in the UK. These WhatsApp groups circulate clan-based narratives and grievances and are also places where funds can be raised.

Prominent elders report that they have limited influence over the members of these groups. This reflects changes in the role of traditional authorities that have been documented previously.⁸ The prevalence and importance of clan militias is itself of interest, as these groups represent clan protection in an area of Somalia well-known for having a large number of well-armed local clans. On the one hand, local people recognize that these *cabtoy* and militia create insecurity and are difficult to control, but on the other hand, they feel they are needed as each act as a form of protection (or deterrent) from attacks by other groups in the absence of any other form of more powerful authority.

2. Mistaken identity, misinformation and collateral damage

Revenge killings can quickly escalate due to mistaken identity and misinformation, which is a fairly common occurrence, as a different sub-clan or village than intended can be mistakenly targeted. This can happen through misunderstandings or misinformation about the identities of different groups. Sometimes, completely different identity groups can be killed by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Such incidents, more likely when tensions are high, can quickly lead to escalations. Several examples took place in the incidents referred to above.

⁸ Gundel, J. (2006), The Predicament of the 'Oday': the role of traditional structures in security, rights, law and development in Somalia', Danish Refugee Council. (see: https://www.academia.edu/17361544/The_Predicament_of_the_Oday_The_role_of_traditional_structures_in_Somalia)

3. Peace activists as targets

The Mudug Youth Peace and Integration Forum (*Madasha Nabadda iyo isdhexgalka Dhalinyarada Gobolka Mudug*, also referred to as the 'youth committee') are relatively well-known. They include youth from all clans in the town, either side of the town border. The youth are an important group within Galkayo's civic space and played a significant role in the 2017 agreement. While they do not have the same power as government or elders they have the capacity to put pressure on those authorities and gain public support. Their movement and messages resonate with ordinary citizens thereby putting pressure on local authorities.

The existence and activities of the youth movement have given some of its members a public profile, representing a civic and peacemaking voice, but also which can make them a target for revenge killings. This is true on both sides of the city, north and south. While these youth committee members are important, they are not well organized, lack resources and tend to react to escalating tensions and conflict in the city. Concerning the recent violence, the youth suggested that the elders were more interested and involved in meeting the President of Puntland who was in turn looking to garner support for his election process. They campaigned to bring attention back to the plight of the city.

4. Role of Al Shabaab

The presence and role of Al Shabaab (AS) is difficult to prove but there are many indications of their influence in conflict dynamics. AS cells have been penetrated in recent years in the Galkayo area and intelligence gained and shared between Puntland and Galmudug authorities. Information gleaned from AS operatives has revealed the role of the group in fomenting violence between the clans; people have realized that previous killings were instigated by the group. A group of leading political and military peace activists who worked closely in generating the 2017 peace agreement were killed, on 18 December 2020, in an AS attack. This included the former governor of northern Mudug region and the commander of special forces unit in Galmudug.

5. Role of Government and elders

The local government in Galkayo is often powerless to intervene as killings escalate as the local military and police have fewer men and arms than local clan militias. The result is that there is a culture of impunity that is not found in FMS capitals in general. Many known murderers are roaming the city, confident that the police will take no action unless their clan agrees to it. As one youth put it, 'the police will chase you around for not paying a fine or few dollars of tax but will not move a finger if someone commits a murder in front of the police station.'

Elders differ in their positions. Some are more interested in national and state politics because it is associated with financial rewards and carries a more limited social burden. Related to this is the fact that in the past successive governments have interfered in the section of elders, promoting those who do the politician's bidding rather than people's bidding. These types of elders see their traditional role as a burden that pays little and, because people know this, they question the authority of the same elders, seeing many as neither traditional nor leaders. In regional capitals and in Mogadishu, the police and the

courts do often intervene in murder cases, with elders playing less of a role – there is much less a culture of impunity than in Galkayo.⁹

A further problem in Galkayo that appears to be restricting elders is that there are a number of previous murders that are yet to be settled and the *diya* to be paid is therefore substantial. This is hindering some elders from even coming to the table or coming to an agreement. The federal government recognises this and the federal interior minister on a visit to Galkayo in 2023 offered to assist with *diya* payments.

6. Post-2017 clan agreements

The 2017 agreement was between the two warring sides of the city, namely the Galmudug and Puntland authorities and the respective clan entities on either side; although the elders, youth and woman were all present and signatory to it. To develop the agreement further, local clans were to develop specific agreements to normalise their relationships and to clear outstanding cases. This included counting the number of people killed from each clan and paying *diya* compensations to the side that had more fatalities. This was done initially but within a few years more killings took place and the system of coming together and clearing past claims weakened. This in turn fueled or enabled further cycles of revenge killings.

Political developments provide additional distractions for inter-clan agreement making, including the election cycles at FMS and FGS levels. Some of the north-south hostilities have however been eased by distractions elsewhere, in particular as the young fighters – known as *mooryan* in Somali – of the Sa'ad were incorporated into the Galmudug forces and were moved south as part of the ongoing offensive against Al Shabaab. However, the *cabtoy* remained in Galkayo North and are considered a key reason for the current spate of revenge killings in that area.

⁹See Majid, N. and Abdirahman, K. (2024), 'Justice and Security in Kismayo and Galkayo', for a brief comparative discussion (<https://peacerep.org/2024/03/14/justice-and-security-in-kismayo-and-galkayo/>)

Conclusion & Recommendations

Galkayo remains an important border town, with huge significance for peace and conflict in central areas of Somalia, including Puntland, Galmudug and Mogadishu. The 2017 agreement represents a major development in Somalia's political evolution, but it remains incomplete due to the lack of subsequent inter-clan agreements and the lack of enforcement of agreement principles.

The multiple and heavily armed clan militias in central regions and the acceptance of *cabtoy* or drunkards reflect Somalia's wider security arena, with multiple armed actors and competing forms of public authority. In central regions, including Galkayo town, local populations are in a difficult position, as their clan militias (and *cabtoy*) are important for protection, but, at the same time, recognize they can be the cause of localized insecurity, which can escalate dangerously. In contrast, in regional capitals killing with impunity generally does not take place.

Revenge killings are crimes and generally not connected with wider political issues, although they can be instrumentalized by political elites. The criminal elements of the clans on the other hand are a serious problem, remain powerful and are likely to have connections to Al Shabaab. In order to mitigate the potential for escalating revenge killing and improved law and order the following suggestions are made:

- Government leadership in Garowe, Dhusamareb and Mogadishu should support a sufficiently strong, joint police force in Galkayo, including identifying and apprehending known criminal elements.
- Elders require engagement and support to pursue and/or maintain inter-clan agreements.
- Support and encouragement to networks of peace activists, including credible elders, women and youth groups would have beneficial impact in Galkayo and could demonstrate to other parts of the country the potential of social activism and civil society.
- International actors can demonstrate a commitment to peacebuilding in Somalia by engaging in Galkayo and supporting progress that has been made since 2017, based on the learning that has been documented around the 2017 Galkayo Agreement.

About PeaceRep

PeaceRep is a research consortium based at The University of Edinburgh. Our research is re-thinking 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.

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform

PeaceRep.org | peacerep@ed.ac.uk | Twitter [@Peace_Rep_](https://twitter.com/Peace_Rep)

School of Law, University of Edinburgh, Old College, South Bridge, EH8 9YL

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Consortium members include: Conciliation Resources, Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University, Dialectiq, Edinburgh Law School, International IDEA, LSE Conflict and Civicism Research Group, LSE Middle East Centre, Queens University Belfast, University of St Andrews, University of Stirling, and the World Peace Foundation at Tufts University.

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Conflict & Civiness Research Group
LSE IDEAS
lse.ac.uk/CCRG | Twitter [@LSE_CCRG](https://twitter.com/LSE_CCRG)
ideas.ccr@lse.ac.uk