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Mapping the Fragments – Justice and Security in Somalia

Galkayo and Kismayo

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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

This report examines justice and security dynamics in Somalia through a comparative analysis of Kismayo and Galkayo, applying and extending Bell and Wise's (2022) framework that categorizes the fragmented peace-conflict spaces emerging from (failed) national peacemaking frameworks.¹ Specifically, it considers three types of spaces identified by Bell and Wise – territorially limited transcalar spaces, borderland mediation spaces, and route-of-passage spaces – to better understand the evolution of political and security arrangements in Somalia following the civil war and state collapse in the 1990s, and the ongoing internationally-driven state formation processes since the early 2000s.

This study focuses on two fragments of Somalia's peace-conflict landscape – the towns of Kismayo and Galkayo – which reflect the variegated political orders operating at different scales – urban and sub-national. Kismayo, a seaport in southern Somalia and the de facto capital of Jubbaland, has developed a centralized political authority where justice and security arrangements have been shaped by Somalia's 'Islamist turn' and proximity to the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab. In contrast, Galkayo, a divided border town in central Somalia, straddles the boundary between Puntland and Galmudug, with governance shaped by different authorities, clan and sub-clan identities on either side of the town. In Kismayo, the Jubbaland authority dominates political and security structures, exercising a monopoly on violence. Galkayo, however, is characterized by contested governance, with multiple actors negotiating authority over justice and security. These differences shape different justice and security outcomes: Kismayo operates under a centralized and controlled political order, whereas Galkayo remains fragmented and requires continuous mediation. Both towns also lie along strategic trade corridors and maintain significant diaspora connections, reinforcing Somalia's broader transcalar political and economic landscape.

While both towns exhibit characteristics from all three categories defined by Bell and Wise, Kismayo, under the Jubbaland administration, aligns more closely with a territorially limited transcalar space, where governance and security are consolidated under a dominant authority within a local political settlement that both reflects and shapes the wider Somali peace-conflict landscape. The 'Kismayo bubble' has enabled credible justice provision while also fostering processes of inter-clan reconciliation. However, while its more centralized structure has improved stability, it has also limited civic and political space, reinforcing exclusionary forms of governance.

Conversely, Galkayo functions more as a borderland mediation space, where its dual administration requires ongoing negotiation between its respective federal member states, Puntland and Galmudug, its clan constituents, and the federal government in Mogadishu. Unlike Kismayo, Galkayo lacks a dominant security actor, making justice and security governance fluid and contingent on continuous mediation. The 2017 Galkayo Agreement opened avenues for dialogue and conflict resolution, yet governance in the town remains inherently unstable. Bell and Wise's framework suggests that such spaces require sustained negotiation and adaptation to maintain security and political order.

Despite their distinct political orders, both Kismayo and Galkayo also function within route-of-passage spaces as trade corridors that impact justice and security dynamics in different ways. These arrangements are further shaped by broader national political struggles, regional power shifts, and international intervention. Recognizing these localised variations is essential for designing more effective peace and security interventions that move beyond elite-level political settlements. The study emphasises the importance of tailoring interventions to local realities while ensuring they can contribute to national peacebuilding efforts.

Key Findings

- ▶ A granular understanding of Somalia's fragmented governance landscape can enhance policy and programmatic engagement by shifting the focus from dominant elite-level narratives to local realities. This is particularly important in securitized, "bunkerized" environments such as Somalia.
- ▶ Peacebuilding and justice and security efforts must engage actors at multiple levels, ensuring that international stakeholders do not become entangled in centre-periphery or periphery-periphery political struggles. Facilitating dialogue and exchange among stakeholders across different spaces and levels can foster comparative understandings of justice and security dynamics, leading to more contextually relevant interventions that reflect Somalia's diverse political realities.
- ▶ Localised peace and security experiences should aim to inform national reconciliation processes, but this requires a realistic framework for power and resource sharing that accounts for localised security dynamics. Peacebuilding efforts should aim to link local mechanisms as building blocks into national reconciliation frameworks where possible, rather than reinforce fragmentation. That said, it is necessary to manage national-level elite dynamics to protect local agreement processes and ensure they can flourish. Political elites should be incentivized to engage with local governance structures to ensure that national visions are rooted in local realities, rather than abstract models.
- ▶ Political authority remains in flux across Somalia, requiring continuous negotiation and adaptive policymaking from both local and national actors. While Kismayo and Galkayo exhibit distinct characteristics, their governance structures are shaped by broader political, economic, and security shifts, underscoring the need for flexible and responsive peacebuilding approaches.

Introduction

This paper draws on an analysis of the PA-X Local Peace Agreements Database,² conducted by Christine Bell and Laura Wise of PeaceRep (2023),³ who argue for the need to reimagine peace processes by mapping and understanding the fragmented peace-conflict spaces identified in the database. They argue that the general failure of national peace processes has contributed to the emergence of new spaces and dynamics of both peace and conflict, particularly at sub-national levels, and that understanding these spaces can better inform policy responses.

We extend this reconceptualization of the peace-conflict landscape to the area of justice and security, by focusing on two of the fragments of Somalia's peace/conflict tapestry, Kismayo and Galkayo, both significant urban spaces, each with their own local dynamics, and each set within a broader arena of actors and relationships, including their respective federal member states (FMS), the federal government (FGS), and their regional and transnational positionalities.

Kismayo, in southern Somalia, is the de facto capital of Jubbaland. Its political authority – including justice and security arrangements – is informed by the 'Islamist turn' in Somalia and its geographic location vis-à-vis the militant Islamist group Al-Shabaab. Crucial in this context is that the Jubbaland authority holds a monopoly on violence in this seaport and town. Its economic and security relationships with Kenya and Ethiopia are salient additional factors in its form of political order.

Galkayo, on the other hand, is a divided border town in central Somalia, marking the boundary between Puntland and Galmudug FMS, and the different clan and sub-clan identities on either side of the border. Political authority in Galkayo – including justice and security arrangements – is contested. There is no dominant security actor in the town. Each of these two urban centres is influenced to different degrees by 'non-local' forces, including their respective diaspora as well as the federal government in Mogadishu. Furthermore, both Kismayo and Galkayo are important trading hubs, a notable factor in Somalia's process of state formation. These respective histories, identities and factors have shaped processes of state formation as well as justice and security outcomes.

This paper draws on work carried out under PeaceRep Somalia and builds on its predecessor, the Conflict Research Programme (CRP). Kismayo and Galkayo have been loci of interest and research within the two programmes in relation to peace-making, state formation, and justice and security.⁴ Research has included court monitoring as well as interviews and participant observation.

We begin the paper with Bell and Wise's framing of the 'spaces of local agreements', and its relevance to Somalia and our urban research sites. The following two sections provide an overview of Somalia's broader peacebuilding context and its more recent political settlement. The problematic entanglement of international aid in the country is then introduced, followed by an outline of Somalia's security 'arena', with its implications for the provision of justice. We then briefly outline the fragmented and multi-layered peace and conflict context in the country before examining our two urban case studies. Finally, we conclude with thematic and policy implications.

Background – the Spaces of Local Peace Agreements

Today's contexts for supporting peace require an appreciation of the current fragmented global order in which, within many national contexts, multiple actors are present – local, national, transnational and international. Fragmented conflicts are in part a product of the nation-state-building projects, and understanding conflict resolution requires an understanding of the places and spaces of local agreements.⁵ According to Bell and Wise, 'the local' as a space can be understood as connected to the space of the 'national', the 'transnational', and the 'international' in non-hierarchical ways; it is a transcalar space.⁶

In the case of Somalia, a fragile, national political settlement has been in place for over ten years and is generally understood to be part of an evolving (and partial) peace-making process, in which different elements of a – still imaginary – 'national' whole exists. These elements, as different configurations of public authority, are in variable states of peace and conflict. For example, Somaliland remains a several decade old *de facto* state with which the federal government of Somalia periodically engages (as equal sovereign entities). Another major actor is the militant Islamist group, Al-Shabaab, a form of political authority with a large territorial presence and extra-territorial reach across much of southern and central Somalia, including through its justice and security capacity. Somalia's FMS are themselves polities with their own state formation logic, and with different degrees of autonomy from the centre. FMS are fragmented internally, spatially, temporally and in terms of customary authority vis-à-vis the state. Southern and central Somalia has been described as a series of city states, reflecting the different levels and reach of government authority.⁷ Within this complex tapestry, many 'local' agreements of different orders are made (and unmade) and varying practices of justice provision and security co-exist. Drawing on the PA-X Local database, Bell and Wise point to three different types of physical and conceptual spaces that can be created:

- ▶ **territorially limited transcalar space** - where local agreements address a defined sub-state geography, such as a city, to produce a local political settlement in ways that can impact on the wider conflict.
- ▶ **borderland mediation space** - for example between two different tribes or clans, which addresses the interfaces between different communities as places of intercommunal transaction, movement, and exchange that contain the potential for conflict or peace.

- ▶ **route-of-passage space** - which could be a road or path distinct from the surrounding area, created by the very act of journeying. The road as a space is often significant to those that 'stand apart' from the conflict, and seek to pass through it, such as pastoralists, the displaced, or humanitarian workers.

As we indicate above and discuss below, Kismayo and Galkayo embody elements of all of these spaces. They are both distinct urban spaces, with transcalar dimensions. They are borderland mediation spaces, most obviously in the case of Galkayo, which is perhaps the most significant border town in Somalia, divided at the state and clan levels. They are also important hubs in 'route-of-passage spaces' as they both lie along major trade corridors; although for our purposes, as domains for justice and security, their urban status is the focus.

Specifically, we respond to Bell and Wise's call that 'policy makers need to begin to understand and map the fragments which operate spatially and conceptually to variously create geographic, group-based, and project-based relationships with capacity for conflict and peace.'⁸ However, while Bell and Wise's framework provides a valuable analytical tool that draws on a large database of local peace agreements, it is less clear whether the authors have in mind specific applications – the 'so what' question for policy makers and programme design. Our aim is to advance some responses to this question, as they raise complex issues for how to engage in highly fragmented contexts.

The Broader Peace Process Context – National, Local and their Entanglement

Somalia provides a rich history in peace-making at multiple levels. Since the collapse of the state in 1991, there have been several national reconciliation conferences as well as uncounted numbers of sub-national peace processes; from the better-known establishment of Somaliland and Puntland to many other local inter-clan agreements.⁹ At the national level a series of peace processes took place from 2000, stimulated and enabled by regional and international actors (Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya as well as Western states), aimed at generating a political settlement between major warring parties. These interventions generated several transitional governments and eventually the current Federal Government of Somalia.¹⁰ These externally driven national peace processes have been contrasted with the more organic (and successful) Somali-driven early political settlements, such as is seen in Somaliland and Puntland.¹¹

Bradbury provides a synthesis of both international and Somali-driven peace processes identifying several findings for each type of process.¹² The preoccupation with state building arrangements and externally determined criteria (timeframes, representation, mediator quality) at the expense of reconciliation and transitional justice are highlighted at the national level and contrasted with local level peace processes (see Table 1).

Table 1. Peace Processes in Somalia¹³

Somalia 'Ownership'	Externally Driven
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ locally designed ▶ locally mediated ▶ locally managed ▶ locally financed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ externally designed ▶ externally mediated ▶ externally managed ▶ externally financed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimate leadership and representation, locally selected • Sufficient and flexible timeframe • Located in the Somali region • Traditional mechanisms of consensus building and conflict resolution • Systems for reparation are fundamental • Use of sanctions against 'spoilers' • Inclusive, involving broad public participation • Substantive efforts to disseminate proceedings and outcomes, ensuring popular endorsement • Transitional mechanisms established to oversee implementation (e.g. joint security committees) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contested leadership and representation (often not locally endorsed) • Insufficient timeframe • Located outside the Somali region • Limited scope for reconciliation • Conflict resolution mechanisms focussed on 'quick fix' power-sharing solutions • No transitional justice or reparation • No sanctions employed • Exclusive, with limited public participation • Weak public outreach, no dissemination or attempts at public ratification • Emphasis on establishing government rather than transitional entity or the tasks it is mandated to fulfil

The studies utilised by Bradbury were conducted prior to the establishment of the federal government in 2012, but even at that time identified the importance of diaspora actors in peace and conflict processes. Acknowledging the transcalar character of Somalia, Majid et al. point out that 'drivers of conflict and political instability operate at four levels – international, regional (transboundary), national, and local.¹⁴ Each of these levels is related to the others but also possesses a high degree of independent energy. This means that political changes at any one level affect others in unpredictable ways.'¹⁵

During the 2000s, while various internationally mediated (and funded) national peacebuilding processes were taking place, mainly outside the country, experiments in the generation of political order were evolving within southern and central Somalia, separate from the already established polities in the north (Somaliland and Puntland). The most powerful of these involved alliances of clan elders, Islamic/sharia'a courts and businesspeople.¹⁶ This movement was responding not only to the continuation of criminality and violence associated with warlordism in central and southern Somalia, but also to their incorporation into the early forms of the new Transitional Federal Government, referred to, for example, as 'warlord-parliamentarians'.¹⁷ These spatially distinct initiatives ultimately coalesced under the umbrella of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) which, in 2006, rapidly expanded across much of southern and central Somalia, claiming the capital Mogadishu and the important seaport of Kismayo in present-day Jubbaland.¹⁸ The ICU did not reach Galkayo town. In relation to peace and justice and security, this movement represented a response to warlordism and clan-based violence and competition.

The rise of the ICU led to a military response by Ethiopia (supported by the US), which shattered the group and led to the emergence of Al-Shabaab and other militant Islamist groups. This in turn led to further international engagement and eventually to the establishment of the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) in 2012. This federal arrangement was described by political scientist and Somalia expert Ken Menkhaus as 'principally a division of spoils that is held together by a combination of a common threat posed by Al-Shabaab, copious levels of security driven external aid, and protection afforded by AMISOM peacekeepers.'¹⁹ As such, Moe argues that Somalia became a paradigmatic case in the post-9/11 nexus between peace operations and counterinsurgency, where AMISOM (African Union Mission in Somalia) peacekeepers are in place to reduce the threat of Al-Shabaab.²⁰

The Political Settlement

The political settlement in Somalia has been successful in mitigating large-scale inter-clan violence but has seen very limited progress on core issues of governance. As Menkhaus starkly outlines, the key features or 'rules of the game' around the political settlement include: ²¹

- ▶ a shared understanding that elites across clan and factional lines will enjoy at least some access to resources flowing through the federal state, even if the lion's share of the resources are controlled by a few dominant Mogadishu-based clans
- ▶ an agreement that elites of each clan-family enjoy a monopoly on resources in regional member states where their clan family is dominant
- ▶ an accord that power-sharing among the elites is enshrined in fixed proportional representation, known in Somalia as the "4.5 formula"
- ▶ an understanding on the use of embedded political violence (assassinations, or orchestration of communal clashes), and that they remain a tool of choice in inter-elite competition but are constrained compared to the years of open civil war
- ▶ acknowledgement that new elite groupings, including diaspora members, must sometimes be accommodated through new elite settlements
- ▶ routinisation of practices requiring businesses seeking to operate in areas of another clan's territory to forge partnerships with businesspeople from the local clan(s)
- ▶ a generally (but not universally) shared commitment to maintaining weak rule of law
- ▶ a common desire to attract maximum foreign interest in and financial support for Somalia

As part of this elite bargain, Menkhaus argues that political cartels share a common desire to maintain chronic state weakness and insecurity as opposed to working towards improved peace and governance. He suggests that the political cartels within this elite bargain see peacebuilding and state building as lucrative projects, but not necessarily as desirable outcomes.²² Given this context, government authority has poor, albeit variable, legitimacy among the Somali public. Ahmad et al. argue that there are two elite bargains in Somalia, one between the FGS and FMS (and their international backers) and one between Al-Shabaab and local populations.²³

International actors feed into this political dispensation in different ways. Regional states (in the Gulf, Horn of Africa and East Africa) have been actively engaged in Somalia for many years, particularly since the establishment of the federal system, pursuing their own interests and playing out their respective political competitions and disputes through proxies in the country; by supporting the different polities and their respective elites within Somalia.²⁴ Western donors themselves reflect a range of priorities – counterterrorism, maritime security, state-building, development, humanitarianism – providing contradictory incentives for local elites.

Political and Programmatic Outcomes

In reimagining peace-conflict spaces in Somalia, it is important to consider the role and positionality of international agencies in shaping the peace, justice and security landscape. Much of international engagement has become deeply entangled in Somalia's political economy, with its resources often functioning as various forms of corruption and patronage. For example, Haggmann draws on Bayart's concept of extraversion to stabilisation and political settlements in Somalia to argue that 'Persistent tactics by Somali elites—mobilizing, appropriating and redirecting foreign resources and agendas—have been at the core of failed state-building,' and that this involves the interconnected role of local, national and foreign actors.²⁵

Corruption and aid diversion within the humanitarian sector is a recurrent theme in Somalia, and is most accurately understood as a function of the networks and relations between international and national actors, rather than, as it is often portrayed, a problem of Somalis. Recent analysis has pointed out how the incentives and ways of working within the aid sector are as much a part of these dynamics as those of the Somali environment itself.²⁶

While the humanitarian sector often bears the brunt of focus on malpractice, pervasive corruption as a global phenomenon typically affects all sectors.²⁷ Elder highlights this practice in the context of contracting within the international community's logistics services in Somalia.²⁸ Lack of accountability within the UN system is an important factor in Elder's analysis and was recently highlighted in an analysis of peacekeeping in the country.²⁹ The quality of external mediation in Somali peace processes has also been questioned.³⁰

A recent commentary by one of the authors of this report explores how parliamentary processes have been captured and coopted by incumbent political elites. This is evident in their control over bills and amendments in parliament, as well as elections themselves.³¹

Increasing investment in political economy and conflict analysis, at the programmatic level, has been developing in Somalia, in (belated) recognition of complex local dynamics and risks of programme and agency capture and corruption. The lack of such analysis was associated with the 2015/16 conflict in Galkayo, prior to the establishment of the 2017 Agreement (see below).³² While such analysis has been prioritised in recent years, the deeply entrenched networks of corruption and patronage remain problematic.

In summary, the dominant political and governance culture that has evolved over the last decade or more – corrupt, transactional, short-termist – is endemic, will remain entrenched, and therefore should inform the design of programmatic interventions.³³

The Somalia Security Arena

Access to justice is determined to a significant degree by the security context. Hills describes Somalia's 'security sector' as a shifting terrain of security coalitions – a security 'arena' rather than a coherent and 'unified' sector.³⁴ In this environment, security governance operates according to personalized relationships and entrepreneurial rivalries, involving a range of power brokers who may include politicians, businesspeople or warlords, as well as security actors such as police, militia, elders, religious authorities, and commercial security companies or militaries, intelligence agencies, and special units.³⁵

The FGS and the FMS are among the key security actors, but each can be further unpacked. The FGS is largely aligned with the interests of the sitting president and the coalition of clan and business groups supporting him; the FGS does not yet have strong institutional interests that persist regardless of the incumbent.³⁶ Despite the extensive external resources poured into the 'security sector' and pledges by subsequent Somali leaders to meaningfully reduce the salience of clan identity (and loyalty) within government forces, arguably little has changed over the years.³⁷ This dynamic was evident again in the 2022 transition from former President Abdi Mohamed Abdi 'Farmajo' to current President Hassan Sheikh Mohamoud (HSM), when many members of the Somali National Army (SNA) were removed due to perceived loyalty to their original patron.

In Somalia, security rents are a critical source of political finance for FGS and FMS leaders (and others). Tellingly, when government-aligned actors use larger scale organized violence—whether to counter Al-Shabaab, contest a border, or influence regional elections—they rely on army units drawn from their own clan and its allies. They cannot be certain that other parts of the SNA will be sufficiently motivated to follow orders.³⁸

The role of the FMS in controlling and deploying violence varies by state, and is therefore difficult to generalize – the cases of Galkayo and Kismayo are discussed further below. However, certain basic incentive structures apply. Any given member of the armed forces has three entities theoretically competing for his loyalty – the clan, the FMS, and the SNA/FGS. The SNA is almost never in a position to win this struggle for loyalty, as no major actor (including the FGS) has an interest in it becoming a sufficiently cohesive institution. As a result, the real competition for the loyalty of both official and semi-official armed forces takes place between states (FMS), clans, and more rarely, foreign patrons.

Given the above general overview, there are examples where security forces and their political authorities can provide a degree of security, enabling the provision of justice to be developed (to varying extents), as we elaborate below.

1. Transcalar contexts – Kismayo and Galkayo

The following section explores the fragmented and multi-layered political and security contexts of Kismayo and Galkayo.

a) *Galkayo town – governance and authority*

Galkayo town traverses a political, social and security borderline at the intersection of two FMS, Puntland and Galmudug. As such, it also divides two major clan families, the Darod and the Hawiye, and their constituent and powerful local sub-clans – the Omar Mahmoud and Sa'ad respectively, along with a third Darod sub-clan, the Lelkasse, which is also a significant actor. This borderline is inherited from the Mudug Accord of 1993, which divided the town into its northern and southern portions, following the collapse of the state and civil war in the early 1990s.³⁹ Galkayo North became part of the emergent polity of Puntland from the late 1990s, while Galkayo South became part of the much more unreconciled and unstable central area of south Mudug and Galmudug regions. The Accord acted as a prolonged ceasefire within the town but also represented a semi-permanent break and barrier in social and political relations across this border.

Galkayo North evolved within Puntland as a relatively stable, self-governing locality within its broader polity, with its own local administration and, importantly, benefiting from investment by its clan-identified private sector and the return of its diaspora both physically and through their remittances. The benefits of relative peace were also seen in the presence of the international aid sector, which was disproportionately based in the more peaceful north of the town. The southern portion of the town was much less stable, as there was no equivalent peacebuilding process in areas to the south. As a result, business and political elites from Galkayo South were much more invested in the capital of Mogadishu, where there were better facilities and political and financial opportunities. Galkayo South was therefore relatively neglected as an urban locality.

In all directions, the hinterland around the town encompasses a vast rangeland where pastoral communities from different clans and lineages move their livestock according to seasonal rainfall patterns, which entails moving across administrative and political borders. This inevitably includes moving between the invisible border dividing Puntland and Galmudug. Tensions and conflicts which arise in rural areas around, for example, resource scarcity, can quickly manifest in the town in the form of revenge killings.⁴⁰

The establishment of an officially recognised government in Mogadishu in 2012 and the creation of federal member states marked both new conflict and then peace and renewal in Galkayo. While Puntland was incorporated into the federal system as a pre-existing polity, Galmudug was formed in 2015 as a new polity (combining the regions of Galgaduud and south Mudug), as part of the state-building project. Tensions around the creation of Galmudug, particularly elite rivalries between Puntland and Galmudug, were felt in Galkayo and culminated in a major outbreak of conflict in 2015 and 2016. This eventually led to the Galkayo 'local' Agreement.⁴¹

b) The Galkayo Agreement and the post-agreement peace

The 2017 Galkayo Agreement was developed over two to three years and required sensitivity to both the national and local contexts. Influential decision-makers regarding Galkayo were based not only in the federal capital, Mogadishu, but also in the state capitals of both Puntland (Garowe) and Galmudug (Dhusamareb). A network of peace activists positioned inside formal institutions, such as the government and the UN in particular, as well as elders, women and youth groups, worked behind the scenes to support the peace-making process.⁴²

The agreement and its aftermath led to the re-establishment of social relations across this politically significant border area, a major achievement in Somalia's recent political history. However, peace remains fragile and unfinished. The key mediators involved in the process took an activist approach to peacebuilding, which was sufficiently powerful to counter underlying grievances and the transactional, elite-driven politics that dominate Somalia's political relations.⁴³

The Galkayo Agreement established a joint police force, which has been able to act across the town's divide, returning stolen goods for example, and which therefore acts to avoid reigniting grievances and revenge killings. A federal security force was also established to control security in the town's market area, which had been a prime location for violence when tensions arose.

Since the establishment of Galmudug, two separate administrations—one in Galkayo North and one in Galkayo South—have operated in the city, each linked to its respective FMS. Both administrations maintain their own justice systems, including police, judges, and local courts, alongside the customary system. As of early 2023, six years after the signing of the agreement, Khalif Abdirahman, following a research visit to the town, was moved to say:

It is abundantly evident that the residents of Galkayo feel very positive about their future and what they have achieved so far. However, an outsider coming to the city may feel different. 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 city.⁴⁴

This risk of inter-clan conflict that he identified did in fact develop soon after this visit, when a series of revenge killings between the Lelkasse of Galkayo North and the Sa'ad of Galkayo South escalated, threatening the agreement itself.⁴⁵

c) Kismayo town – governance and authority

Kismayo is a seaport and the de facto capital of Jubbaland, Somalia's only FMS that borders Kenya. It also has a border with Ethiopia in its northern Gedo region. Kismayo has a cosmopolitan history, as do many coastal towns in Somalia, a legacy of their incorporation into historical maritime trading arenas as well as the modernising state project of the 1970s and 1980s. However, following the collapse of the state in 1990/91, many people from urban areas throughout Somalia were forced to flee to their clan territories or abroad, to escape violence and instability, changing the town's demography.

Kismayo was an extremely violent and insecure town during the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s, contested by different warlord figures. The arrival of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) in 2006 marked a significant change in relation to security and the provision of justice, a characteristic of Islamist rule in Somalia (and elsewhere). The current President of Jubbaland, Ahmed Mohamed Islam 'Madobe', was governor of Kismayo under the ICU during its brief rule, and returned again, ousting Al-Shabaab, several years later, following the splintering of the ICU after the Ethiopian incursion.

Jubbaland's emergence as federal member state within Somalia's federal system is understood in part as a regional security project involving Ethiopia and particularly Kenya, who initially both supported Madobe in the early years of Jubbaland's establishment. It is also described as a transborder clan project reflecting the interests of the Ogaden elite in Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.⁴⁶ Madobe has successfully forged himself as a powerful anti-Al-Shabaab actor, through the command of his Jubbaland forces (re-hatted from their earlier Ras Kamboni clan militia days).

Kismayo's mixed population is composed of the Ogaden, Marehan and Harti/Majerteen clans, as well as significant minority populations, including Digil and Mirifle, Somali Bantu, Bajuni and a small Yemeni population. Political competition for the presidency is contested between the two most powerful groups, the Ogaden and the Marehan.

As well as the political and business elites in Kismayo, whose interests the ruling cabal must be mindful of, Al-Shabaab are in close proximity, headquartered in the neighbouring region of Middle Juba, within Jubbaland. Al-Shabaab is skilled in appealing to marginalised or aggrieved groups throughout Somalia, evoking their Islamist ideology and norms to counter the underlying clan-power hierarchies in Somalia. These risks, as well as Madobe's own Islamist history, have enabled the President to create a security and intelligence 'bubble' around Kismayo, contributing to a relatively secure environment and the implementation of a relatively successful justice provision.⁴⁷

d) Kismayo's peace/conflict context

Under the Jubbaland authority, a security and intelligence bubble has been established, which has minimised violence and insecurity in the town, and enabled processes of inter-clan reconciliation to take place.⁴⁸ Public authority in Kismayo has included reforms to the government-run justice sector, with corrupt judges removed and credible replacements identified from within the town, particularly those already practicing sharia'a law and trusted by the local community.⁴⁹

The Jubbaland authority in Kismayo adopted certain Islamist practices, notably emphasising that justice would not be based on clan hierarchies or dominance. In a well-known case in Kismayo, the President authorised the execution of several clan members from his own sub-clan who were associated with a killing. This instantly demonstrated that the Ogaden – to whom the President belongs – did not have impunity in Kismayo.

2. The justice and security contexts – comparing Kismayo and Galkayo

Somalia's legal system was militarised under the authoritarian rule of President Siad Barre (1969-1990). During this period, customary law (*xeer*) and sharia'a law were subjugated, and judicial authority was centralised; courts were weakened and staffed with loyalists, while the Supreme Revolutionary Council became the ultimate legal authority.⁵⁰ Following the collapse of the state, both *xeer* and sharia'a law were re-activated across the country, albeit to varying effects. Puntland created the most developed legal system, which later informed the design of the Federal Government and constitution. *Xeer* continued to be practiced as a dispute resolution mechanism throughout the country.⁵¹ Today, the result is that there are three separate justice systems in Somalia: the formal judiciary structures of regional administrations and central governments; *xeer* or customary law; and sharia'a law (practiced through private sheikhs as well as through Al-Shabaab managed courts). These systems frequently co-exist in the same locations, creating multiple and often contradictory sources of law.⁵²

Three sets of factors have influence over the justice system: clan-identity-based mobilization and conflict; ideological divisions between proponents of different versions of Islamic and secular law; and rent seeking in the context of a war economy.⁵³ The politicisation of the legal system has taken place in the capital, Mogadishu.⁵⁴ At a practical level, the government justice system faces a number of limitations, evident to different degrees across the country. These include a lack of qualified professional at all levels (which has been slowly improving), an urban bias of such courts (reflecting the predominantly urban presence of government in general), a lack of knowledge of existing laws by judges and the public, and slow processes. Independent branches of the legal system, such as the Judicial Service Commission required by the constitution, are completely absent. Additionally, the enforcement of the different legal systems varies across the country. Furthermore, Al-Shabaab operates a parallel justice provision, and has the capacity to apply the system in areas under its direct control, as well as in government-held territory. Al-Shabaab is considered a credible actor in this area, with an enforcement capacity that few can resist.⁵⁵

a) Everyday justice and public authority – use of government courts

By everyday justice, we refer to a range of cases including marital disputes, accidents and injuries, smaller land/property disputes, and small-scale business disputes. These are distinguished from murders or killings and larger business and property disputes, which carry a higher social and political weight and can generate or exacerbate conflicts. Settling such everyday cases takes place in different ways, including under traditional authority, privately engaging sheikhs (practicing sharia'a law), or through the government courts.

In the case of Kismayo, some of the privately practicing sheikhs were moved to the government-run courts as part of the reforms made to the legal system there, as they were considered well-versed in the law, and locally credible and sought after. Court observations at the time demonstrated that these courts were well utilised by local residents and judicial outcomes were well received.⁵⁶ Few examples of miscarriages of justice were noted, including cases where political and clan identity, as well as power, did not appear to influence court judgments.

In Kismayo, the actions of the town's police force were considered more problematic than the practices within the courts themselves.⁵⁷ The political and security context in Kismayo, with a dominant security actor, was seen as beneficial for enforcing judicial rulings – a major limitation in other parts of the country, except in areas or cases where Al-Shabaab was involved.⁵⁸

In order to accommodate the plural legal environment, where customary law and sheikhs are consulted privately, the Jubbaland authority created an elders committee with representation from all clans in Kismayo, which works with the government-run courts to manage and register cases. It does the same with the private administration of disputes by sharia'a judges. The legal process concerning everyday justice in Kismayo has a level of functionality and credibility that is uncommon in Somalia.

In Galkayo, the situation is more complex. The courts operate separately on either side of the town's border, within their respective FMS structures and within a more ambiguous political-security context. On both sides of the town, political – and therefore security – authority is contested between customary (i.e. clan) and government structures, and many clans are heavily armed. In this context, clan hierarchies and clan power are considered the dominant factor in the provision of everyday justice. Court and enforcement processes are strongly influenced by these power hierarchies. These hierarchies are less relevant where equally matched parties are in dispute and therefore where there is an interest to settle to avoid potential escalation. In Galkayo therefore, recourse to the law and the enforcement of justice is heavily mediated by the existing power hierarchies and the absence of a monopoly on violence.

b) Revenge killings

The provision of a credible justice system is most starkly evident around murder and revenge killings, which can quickly undermine everyday security and escalate into larger conflicts. In Kismayo, there has been little or no practice of inter-clan-based revenge killings under the Jubbaland authority. This reflects the position and character of the authority as the dominant security actor; no tolerance for a potentially destabilising cycle of revenge killings would be permitted. In this case, destabilisation carries a huge risk, given the close proximity of Al-Shabaab. If a murder took place, the Jubbaland authority would quickly identify the culprit and punish them accordingly (typically by execution).

In Galkayo, while the population has benefited enormously from the 2017 Agreement, the risk of revenge killings has remained, and in 2024, it escalated significantly, threatening the underlying peace agreement.⁵⁹ These episodes, including revenge killings between groups within Galkayo North and across the border between the Lelkasse and Sa'ad, proved extremely difficult—if not impossible—for government authorities to address. The authorities openly admitted that these were 'clan issues' and acknowledged they would be significantly outgunned if they attempted to enforce their authority.

As a repercussion of these escalations, many innocent bystanders are killed, leading to further escalation of tension, and further killings as new groups are brought into the violence. Vulnerable groups will often leave town temporarily, since victims are targeted based on clan identity rather than their involvement in the incidents.⁶⁰

In Galkayo, the situation is further complicated by the weakened authority of clan elders, undermined by the political elite, and the proliferation of inflammatory discourse on digital platforms, which clan elders struggle to control.⁶¹

c) Political space vs justice and security

Another point of comparison between Kismayo and Galkayo concerns the character of the political space in both towns and its intersection with the provision of justice and security. As noted, the Jubbaland authority in Kismayo performs relatively well in maintaining peace and security, nurturing a credible everyday justice and mitigating against destabilising outbreaks of revenge killings. These are considerable benefits in a region with a recent history of serious violence. However, when it comes to contesting elections and parliamentary seats, the situation is very different, with very limited opportunities to challenge the incumbent president and his close allies.

The quality of this political space is difficult to assess, as serious political challenges have originated from Somalia's political centre in Mogadishu, and are embedded in core-periphery tensions. These tensions often reflect a desire for the centre to dominate the peripheries, typically by installing compliant presidents in the regional/FMS elections through the use of money and/or violence. This dynamic provides a rationale for Madobe to resist such threats by maintaining his own monopoly over political space and violence in Kismayo.

That said, President Madobe also represents a form of Islamist political authority and an authoritarianism also present in Somalia through Al-Shabaab (and its various predecessors, including the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and Al Itihad Al Islamia). Madobe is also a valuable security partner in regional and international security regimes against Al-Shabaab, which further enables and emboldens him in his hold on power.

In contrast, Galkayo has a more open and plural political context, with space to criticise both government and customary authority, although this criticism is primarily directed at the respective regimes to the north and south of Galkayo. A notable observation about the Galkayo Agreement concerned the role of youth and women as peace activists. This activist role of the youth has continued, with some members speaking out critically against the government and elders in relation to the series of revenge killings, calling on political authorities to intervene, partly because some of them were targeted. Also in Galkayo's favour is that it is not at the centre of politics of its respective FMS, and is therefore away from the spotlight of election-related politics.

Conclusions

This report explored political order in Somalia through a comparative analysis of Kismayo and Galkayo, applying insights from Bell and Wise's framework to understand how localised peace, security and justice arrangements function. The study illustrates two contrasting models that have emerged following state collapse, civil war, and subsequent state formation processes. It demonstrates how Kismayo, under the Jubbaland administration, operates a centralized security model, while Galkayo's fragmented governance structure requires continuous (re)negotiation between political elites, clans and community actors. These urban-level differences mirror broader patterns of state formation and political order between the north and south of the country. The findings highlight the need for policy approaches that recognize Somalia's fragmented political landscape, tailoring localised peace and security interventions within a broader national peacebuilding framework.

Bell and Wise's categorization of different peace-conflict spaces provides a useful lens for understanding how these localised arrangements emerge and function within a fragmented political landscape. Resembling a *territoriality limited transcalar space*, the 'Kismayo bubble' reflects the intelligence and security control of the Jubbaland authority in Kismayo, which has been shaped by the persistent threat of Al-Shabaab. The centralized control over security has facilitated a relatively stable justice system, maintaining peace through a dominant power structure that regulates violence and justice mechanisms. However, this model relies on exclusionary politics, limiting civic engagement and political participation. In contrast, Galkayo functions more as a 'borderland mediation space' where multiple competing authorities – Puntland, Galmudug, and various clan actors – continuously renegotiate governance and security. This environment is characterized by dispersed authority, where stability is maintained through ongoing mediation rather than institutionalized enforcement. While the 1993 Mudug Accord largely froze interactions between north and south Galkayo, the outbreak of conflict in 2015/16 and the subsequent 2017 agreement reopened space for dialogue and conflict management.

Both towns operate within broader transcalar dynamics, shaped by their relations to regional capitals (in the case of Galkayo), Mogadishu, and the Somali diaspora. These transnational connections influence governance and security arrangements, with clan constituents in both the 'near' and 'far' diaspora playing significant roles in shaping local dynamics.⁶²

Furthermore, the concept of 'route of passage spaces' adds another lens for understanding local arrangements. Galkayo functions as a key trading hub along a major artery linking northeast and central Somalia, where traders historically have been able to navigate its divided landscape even when broader social interactions were restricted. Kismayo also serves as a route-of-passage space, though primarily linked to Kenya through its seaport, creating a different set of incentives for governance and stability. This corridor offers comparatively limited peace incentives and arguably reinforces Jubbaland's coherence along a narrow geographic axis rather than integrating it more with other Somali regions.

These insights highlight the necessity of context-specific strategies that account for localised realities rather than imposing standardized state-building frameworks that prioritize one-size, top-down approaches. While national peace efforts remain critical, incorporating localised arrangements acknowledges the realities of the ways in which governance, justice, and security are negotiated differently across Somalia's political landscape. Understanding how these local arrangements evolve and how they interact with national and regional dynamics is critical for designing interventions that foster long-term stability in Somalia's fragmented political environment.

In summary:

- ▶ A granular understanding of Somalia's fragmented governance landscape can enhance policy and programmatic engagement by shifting the focus from dominant elite-level narratives to local realities. This is particularly important in securitized, "bunkerized" environments such as Somalia.
- ▶ Peacebuilding and justice and security efforts must engage actors at multiple levels, ensuring that international stakeholders do not become entangled in centre-periphery or periphery-periphery political struggles. Facilitating dialogue and exchange among stakeholders across different spaces and levels can foster comparative understandings of justice and security dynamics, leading to more contextually relevant interventions that reflect Somalia's diverse political realities.

- ▶ Localised peace and security experiences should aim to inform national reconciliation processes, but this requires a realistic framework for power and resource sharing that accounts for localised security dynamics. Peacebuilding efforts should aim to link local mechanisms as building blocks into national reconciliation frameworks where possible, rather than reinforce fragmentation. That said, it is necessary to manage national-level elite dynamics to protect local agreement processes and ensure they can flourish. Political elites should be incentivized to engage with local governance structures to ensure that national visions are rooted in local realities, rather than abstract models.
- ▶ Political authority remains in flux across Somalia, requiring continuous negotiation and adaptive policymaking from both local and national actors. While Kismayo and Galkayo exhibit distinct characteristics, their governance structures are shaped by broader political, economic, and security shifts, underscoring the need for flexible and responsive peacebuilding approaches.

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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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