



# Governance Brief 31

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## Summary

Residents in Beledweyne have been suffering from insecurity in recent months that has resulted from the coexistence of the Hirshabelle state and the self-proclaimed 'Hiiraan state,' both of which have parallel administrations in the town. The lack of a single government authority responsible for the security of the city has allowed an increase in the presence and activities of armed militias and vigilante groups, resulting in robberies, roadblocks, and a surge of violence. The parallel administrations' struggle to control the town has dented the trust of the local constituents. The rivalry between the two sides has disrupted economic activities with roadblocks set up out of the town, causing increases in commodity prices. This is affecting the daily lives of locals, particularly daily wage earners. This governance brief puts forward several policy considerations including, but not limited to, that the local elders lead reconciliation efforts to settle disputes and rebuild communal trust; the federal government to intervene to reign in the armed militias that plague the city, re-establish order, and deal with mobilized Ma'awisley fighters, either through bringing discipline and remuneration or encouraging voluntary disarmament through skills injection.

## About Somali Public Agenda

Somali Public Agenda is a nonprofit public policy and administration research organization based in Mogadishu. Its aim is to advance understanding and improvement of public administration and public services in Somalia through evidence-based research and analysis.

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## Insecurity in Beledweyne: Context, causes, and the way forward

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### Introduction:

Somalia's Provisional Federal Constitution, adopted in August 2012, allows two or more pre-1991 regions to merge, forming a Federal Member State. It was October 2016 when the merger of the Hiiraan and Middle Shabelle regions formed the Hirshabelle state. Before the formation of Hirshabelle, the merger met with resistance in the Hiiraan region, particularly from Beledweyne. The Xawaadle clan and their late Ugaas, Ugaas Hassan Ugaas Khaliif, who died in February 2021, expressed vocal opposition to the state formation process rather than advocating for re-activating a separate state for Hiiraan region by splitting the region into two. This referenced a decree by former president Sharif Sheikh Ahmed in 2011, who divided the region into two regions known as Hiiraan and Upper Shabelle. However, this was not sufficient as it contradicted the federal constitution, which stipulates that the state formation process can only involve the merger of two or more regions that existed pre-1991.

Despite this objection from the Xawaadle clan's chief elder, the presidency was elected to Ali Abdullahi Osole from the Hiiraan region, particularly from Xawaadle. He was also succeeded by another president from his constituency, Mohamed Abdi Waare. Meanwhile, Jowhar, the capital city of the Middle Shabelle region, was designated as the state capital. Although the designation of Jowhar as the capital city was written in the state constitution, the allocation of the presidency, to the Xawaadle was a gentlemen's agreement and was allegedly intended to maintain power-sharing between the two regions. However, this informal arrangement did not continue further after the current president of the state was elected in late 2020. The concentration of both the presidency and state capital in one region further exacerbated the grievance among the Hiiraan constituencies, particularly the Xawaadle.

In 2022, a community-led war against al-Shabaab erupted in the Hiiraan region with the leadership of the then Hiiraan governor for Hirshabelle Ali Jeyte Osman. In 2023, tensions increased in the Hiiraan region when Jeyte was dismissed amid a fierce fight against al-Shabaab. Concurrently, the Ma'awisley<sup>1</sup> militia mobilized by Jeyte gained significant attention as they were widely covered by local and international media. The sacking of Ali Jeyte caused anti-Hirshabelle protests in favor of the dismissed governor, who also rebelled against the state and claimed to preside over "Hiiraan State."

As such, the new "Hiiraan State" has taken over most government administrative offices (including the regional administration), initiated tax collection, and deployed local security forces. The "Hiiraan State" has also provided evacuation support for the flood-prone population. All these movements have given 'Hiiraan State' the de facto power to co-rule Beledweyne and influence other parts of the region.

Despite the ongoing tension between Hirshabelle State and the proclaimed "Hiiraan State," the fight against al-Shabaab intensified under the leadership of Ali Jeyte. During this period, Ali Jeyte was also appointed as the Head of the Federal President's office responsible for coordinating the Ma'awisley. Following the

1 Ma'awisley translates to "Ma'awis wearers" referring to a traditional male garment. The name reflects ordinary civilian men who armed themselves and fought AS with these garments rather than wearing trousers or military uniforms.

appointment, Jeyte became dormant on “Hiiraan State” affairs. However, two parallel Presidents (Abdullahi Abdirahman Aden, known as Ganey, and Abdulkadir Hussein Olow) for “Hiiraan State” emerged; each claiming he succeeded Ali Jeyte. This governance brief treats both groups under the “Hiiraan State” umbrella and discusses the insecurity incidents these developments have caused to the residents of Beledweyne and its surroundings this year, 2024. It further considers the key factors contributing to the current insecurity and recommends possible solutions for moving forward.

### Main insecurity incidents in Beledweyne

Beledweyne is ranked as the second most affected city in Somalia that has suffered al-Shabaab explosions and attacks (after Mogadishu). On top of that, there has been significant politically driven violence, including protests and targeted killings, while roadblocks, mobile phone theft, and business robbery (usually followed by violent assault and sometimes murder) have also increased in the town in 2024.

Since the 2016 opposition to the Hirshabelle state formation led by the late Xawaadle Ugaas, Ugaas Hassan Ugaas Khalif, the political uprising and security friction in Beledweyne was led by General Abdukar Haji Warsame (Xuud), who assumed the leadership of “Hiiraan State” and rose against the federal government led by president Mohamed Abdullahi Farmaajo. In June 2023, community rioting led by the “Hiiraan state” itself took place in Beledweyne after the dismissal of Ali Jeyte as Hirshabelle’s governor for the Hiiraan region.

Despite the political tension between the leadership of the Hishabelle state in Beledweyne and the self-proclaimed “Hiiraan State”, there had previously been peaceful coexistence in the city, preventing the spilling of ‘brotherly’ blood. Their first direct clash occurred when the former governor of the Hiiraan region, Abullahi Sufurow Maalin (who replaced Ali Jeyte Osman), attempted to seize control of the residential building of “Hiiraan State” forces in February 2024. But these early signs of strife hinted at the persistent volatility that would follow.

The ‘brotherly’ blood mask came off in March 2024 as Hirshabelle State and “Hiiraan State” engaged in a direct confrontation that caused casualties from both belligerent sides and civilians. The federal security apparatus and African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS) contingents in Beledweyne have abstained from any intervention to avoid clan sensitivity. Finally, the local elders intervened and escorted the Hirshabelle State officials into the city outskirts.

This clash happened when “Hiiraan State” denied the newly appointed Hiiraan governor, Muse Salaad, to fly into Beledweyne. He was the second governor appointed after the removal of Ali Jeyte as Hiiraan governor for Hirshabelle. Following this refusal, the new governor traveled to Beledweyne overland after landing at the airport in Buulabarde.

After the Mahaas district gathering in March 2024 that hosted the politicians and traditional figures of Xawaadle’s Ali Madaxweyne sub-clan, the impact of “Hiiraan State” and their security intervention and parades somewhat decreased. This could mean that “Hiiraan State” has divided into two camps, and their political demands may have been moderated by federal politicians in favor of Hirshabelle state. These politicians were mobilizing the Xawaadle clan to settle their grievances and contend for the Hirshabelle leadership in the next political transition cycle.

However, a high number of crimes have occurred in the meantime:

- In the weeks between March and April 2024, up to three civilians were reportedly killed through armed robbery. On the

eve of Eid al-Fitr, April 8, a woman was killed in the firefight between armed forces and local vigilantes who stood up to fill the security vacuum in the town. Earlier that evening, armed men robbed clothing shops in the town center, exposing the deep-seated insecurity and inability to distinguish between armed forces who mostly wear generic security uniforms.

- By June 2024, the insecurity escalated further during Eid al-Adhaa, where an armed altercation caused the deaths of two civilians and wounded another at a meat distribution venue. Security forces stationed at the entrance exchanged gunfire with unidentified armed individuals who tried to force their way into the venue. This incident highlights the role of uncontrolled weapons in causing casualties.
- In August 2024, the community was further shocked by the murder of a Beledweyne district official, Abdisahal Shuuriye, by a robbery gang in a mobile theft operation. His death demonstrated the severe risks that government officials and civilians face alike, where mobile phones could cost victims their lives. Moreover, in August, the rape of two girls from minority groups brought to light the broader societal and security challenges facing the town. This situation shows that crimes, including sexual violence, are the effects of conflict and political instability, which usually overshadow basic human rights, leaving the weaker groups, such as women and minorities unprotected.
- September 2024 also saw an escalation in roadblock activity by armed militias, strangling the economic life of the town by blocking the Beledweyne-Matabaan route. Local truck owners’ decision to suspend truck operations in protest reflected the unbearable extortion along the road to Beledweyne. To enforce their protest, the truck owners blocked the road to stop a few trucks that ignored the imposed curfew. Ironically, the roadblockers attacked the businesspeople’s station to release the trucks so they could take money from them. The attack’s result was one death from the roadblockers’ side.
- The truck drivers have not only been subject to extortion of over 30 roadblocks but also murder and injuries. The impact of roadblocks and truck curfews extended to other regions in the country, where livestock and commercial goods had to bypass this route. In Beledweyne, the business suspension of trade flow has caused inflation in the prices of food and necessities and mainly affected the daily wage earners. This exacerbates the problems caused by the lack of circulation of Somali Shilling notes in Beledweyne for around the last 7 years. Ugaas Yusuf Ugaas Hassan led in the clearance of the roadblocks on the Beledweyne-Matabaan route, thereby improving mobility and route safety for a few weeks.
- Still, in September 2024, the situation worsened with the killing of a prominent clan elder, Hassan Yare Dhegnaas, who was publicly stabbed to death in broad daylight. Unlike previous incidents, he was killed by a relative, not bandits, for no disclosed reasons. But the incident highlights the absence of the rule of law, where all kinds of crimes have surged. It sowed fear among the people as it showed that even the respected community leaders weren’t being spared from the escalating violence. The killer was captured by the police and was sentenced to death by the Hiiraan regional court. Even though the family of the late elder forgave the killer through a sub-clan-based arrangement, this could mean that the law enforcer’s hands cannot reach the broader citizens in the town, but only certain cases choose the police and the court system.

- In late September, seven prisoners, including those sentenced to death, escaped from Beledweyne's central police station. This also happened earlier in February, further exposing the weakness and infiltration within law enforcement in handling criminals.
- In October 2024, a 7-year-old boy was kidnapped in Beledweyne. A disagreement in negotiation on the release of the child after the ransom payment between the kidnapper and the family of the boy allegedly led to the tragic death of the child. His body, bound with ropes around his hands and legs, was found on a river bank near Dhagax Jibis bridge in the city center. Police detained suspects and began an investigation.
- On October 11, the city witnessed another clash between the two administrations as Hirshabelle State authorities wanted to stop a celebration gathering for the "Hiiraan State"'s 13-year anniversary in Beledweyne. The confrontation resulted in one death, and celebrations for "Hiiraan State" continued in Beledweyne, Mogadishu, and in the diaspora. This celebration came days after Hirshabelle State's 8-year anniversary since its formation.
- On November 2024, the roadblocks between Beledweyne and Matabaan re-emerged and soon led to the loss of a truck driver's life on the Saalax Jeerre road. The driver had reportedly hesitated to pay a small fee of \$2. The rise of civilian casualties is accompanied by the increased triviality of the reasons behind their deaths. As such, on November 15, a young driver was brutally shot by armed personnel in the Suuqa Balka area of the Kooshin neighborhood. The driver later died of the injury after splashing mud on the armed individual, leading to the shooting.
- November 2024 has also seen bajaj (three-wheeled vehicle) robberies in Beledweyne. This has been on the rise in Beledweyne, with around 30 bajaj robbed recently. This surge in theft has prompted bajaj drivers to arm themselves for protection and also to rob others in revenge. While district police conducted a patrol in the Buunda Weyn village, arresting several young men, overall security in the town has been deteriorating for almost a year with no improvements.
- On December 2024, the "Hiiraan State" role in Beledweyne diminished after its leader attempted to escape an arrest for his close ties with Ethiopia. Meanwhile in December, Hirshabelle state and the National Intelligence and Security Agency (NISA) conducted night patrols on the main road for over two weeks to enhance security. However, these operations were not sustained, potentially affecting the region's stability.

### Primary causes of insecurity in Beledweyne

**Armed militias and civilians:** One of the primary factors leading to insecurity in Beledweyne is the lack of arms control among civilians. This is largely because, since mid-2022, the Hiiraan region's residents, particularly the Xawaadle clan, have been engaged in a war against al-Shabaab. Beledweyne has served as a central hub for coordination and logistics, supporting the war efforts. This includes treating the wounded, managing resources, and handling funds raised both by locals and diasporas to finance the conflict.

The self-defense measures adopted during the intensification of the conflict widely introduced the practice of arming civilians. Owning firearms such as AK-47s and pistols became common in the town and also in rural areas and villages where heavier arms prevailed. Those who did not take up arms in the conflict nevertheless participated in it by serving as informants for the Ma'awisley and

the Somali National Army (SNA) forces. Others were involved in the distribution of food and medicine or in psychological support for the Ma'awisley fighters. This wide-ranging involvement made virtually everyone a target for al-Shabaab, which stimulated further self-arming.

The interconnected and communal self-defense approach worked for the community until the fight ceased, and the Ma'awisley and the government soldiers began to overcrowd the town. In many post-conflict settings, soldiers returning from war can bring economic benefits by temporarily boosting market activity and increasing financial liquidity through spending their wages (White, 2004). This classical scenario is often considered positive. On the flip side, post-war troops may come to the attention of the governing authorities, as their effect on instability can be alarming if not managed properly.

According to a local source, ma'awisley soldiers in Beledweyne were not paid for their offensive efforts except for food rations and weapon supplies. This was despite prior assurances from the federal government. Ma'awisley had to quit their conventional livelihoods, such as livestock husbandry and agriculture. Without a steady source of money to sustain themselves and their families and no active war, these troops returned and overcrowded the urban areas. They then resorted to exploiting their positions, committing crimes such as robbery and phone theft, and establishing roadblocks in Beledweyne and its surroundings. Due to its polarized situation and lack of effective formal administration, Beledweyne attracted those armed factions working without apparent order or authority.

**Parallel administrations:** Two concurrent administrations are operating in Beledweyne. The role of Hirshabelle State is limited to issuing birth certificates, overseeing national examinations, and managing courts and police. While the unofficial but de facto administration of "Hiiraan State" controls key government compounds. Both administrations collect taxes. As a result of this uneasy coexistence, a power vacuum has emerged, leading to increased insecurity and making life progressively more difficult for the citizens. Both Hirshabelle State and "Hiiraan State" blame each other for the ongoing insecurity.

**Absence of organized security forces:** Another significant challenge lies in the absence of organized security forces. The ATMIS and federal security apparatus have not intervened in Beledweyne's internal power struggles, abstaining from involvement due to concerns about exacerbating clan tensions. And even before "Hiiraan State's" increased presence in Beledweyne, the Hirshabelle police force was few. Police officers defected to join "Hiiraan State" as a protest against the Hirshabelle government after the Ali Jeyte dismissal, citing a lack of remuneration by the Hirshabelle government.

Although "Hiiraan State" is not a legal governing body, it has managed to have some control over the town's security through the training of around 500 paramilitary forces encompassing intelligence and police units. These forces' presence gradually vanished due to a lack of salary compensation. This is followed by local community watch groups established by ordinary citizens for night patrol to ensure safety, which also faded away quickly. The current strategy for many citizens is again self-arming for self-defense.

The evident security failure manifests in the internal unrest within the town and trespasses on national security. The "Hiiraan State" has faced criticism for engaging with Ethiopian representatives at the border while publicly showing support for Ethiopia over their perceived replacement by Egypt as a Troop Contributing Country (TCC) to the incoming African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). This has been due to the Somali

government's diplomatic friction with the Ethiopian government before the December Ankara Declaration over the controversial Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by Ethiopia's Prime Minister with the then Somaliland President in January 2024.

## Conclusion

The situation in Beledweyne demonstrates a complex combination of political grievances and insecurity. Tensions between the Hirshabelle State and the self-proclaimed Hiiraan State have exacerbated the instability, exposing people to casualties and insecurity. While the rise of Ma'awisley forces in the Hiiraan region has surfaced the complexities and sustainability of arming civilians, the Beledweyne case highlights a different challenge. It is not merely about mobilizing local populations for self-defense but ensuring these forces operate within a politically stable environment. The impact of the proliferation of illegal and uncontrolled weapons has left Beledweyne citizens susceptible to casualties and fear. Henceforth, this brief puts forward several policy considerations for the federal government of Somalia, Hirshabelle and "Hiiraan State" stakeholders, and the community in the Hiiraan region to collaboratively take action against the instability and bring a lasting solution.

## Policy considerations

**Ma'awisley legacy and leadership:** the sacrifices of the Xawaadle Ma'awisley forces in the war against al-Shabaab in 2022 must not be tarnished by their involvement in the insecurity of the very communities they fought to protect. Safeguarding this legacy falls to the clan elders, firstly the Ugaas Yusuf Ugaas Hassan, who made his first move to eradicate the roadblocks and key mobilizers. It is essential to find a final solution and eradicate the reinstatement of roadblocks. Similar clan-based intervention could be considered in the town to stop killings and robberies. Since the Ma'awisley are mobilized through engagements at the sub-clan level in their formation, this would leverage the traditional elders to engage them and take measures, such as forbidding weapons in the city. However, this necessitates a government hand for enforcement. For voluntary disarmament, the government can aim to inject employment initiatives and vocational training opportunities in the long-run.

**Need for federal government intervention:** revisiting the Ma'awisley model is critical to prevent adverse outcomes elsewhere in the country and ensure these forces remain an asset for future conflicts and not a liability. The government needs those forces for future war efforts, and mobilizing them militarily can eliminate their 'civil society' element, which is the essence of their importance in this fight. Therefore, the government can activate the role of the head of Ma'awisley by keeping a record of their names and the weapons they own. They can also be given monthly stipends to sustain themselves before another war and/or until they fully integrate into society. This means there is a need for a clear plan and strategy for utilizing Ma'awisley forces during and between wars. The coordination of the elders is essential here to avoid any misinterpretations of clannism. A strong federal presence is also significant in the Hiiraan region's borders with Ethiopia, limiting a spillover effect in regional affairs.

**Need for local police intervention:** the unresolved tensions between the Hirshabelle State and the "Hiiraan State" pose a threat to the broader goals of federalism and decentralization, which are key

pillars in Somalia's efforts to build governance structures that work for the common good. To restore this, local police or paramilitary police forces in Beledweyne are essential to bringing back peace and order. Federal-level security apparatuses might escalate clan-based tensions, and this step would ideally be effective after political agreement.

**Flexible and contextualized solutions:** the local vigilantes created by "Hiiraan State" and later by the locals weren't sustainable and quickly got dismantled. This indicates that non-state actors have limited capacity for resolving issues and responding to citizens's needs. At the same time, when state actors like the Hirshabelle government have no full legitimacy in the eyes of some of its constituencies, it also breeds disagreement. Thus, the first and foremost effort must be accumulated through resolving this political grievance that the Xawaadle clan holds against the Hirshabelle State.

Going beyond exploitative politics: although the Xawaadle clan can have grievances against the formation of the Hirshabelle State, it is also worth noting that the leaders of "Hiiraan State" rarely attempt to address these grievances. Instead, they utilize public dissatisfaction for personal gains. The Xawaadle community, including the diaspora who heavily finance the local political initiatives, and the intellectuals of that region need to have serious discussions about the different hats worn by politicians while people pay the cost for insecurity and underdevelopment.

**Prioritizing reconciliation over elections:** the failure to resolve grievances during the formation of Hirshabelle State has led to underdevelopment and must not be repeated in future political cycles. Hirshabelle state's formation in 2016 and also the political dispensation in 2020 were affected by the federal elections calculus. Hasty elections cost eight years of limited progress and stagnant governance for societies in the Hirshabelle State, particularly in the Hiiraan region. It is essential to not waste the coming four to five years without solving the root cause of this problem. A social and political reconciliation is crucial before organizing another state-level or federal election. This means that electing a president from Xawaadle for Hirshabelle State won't solve the situation, just like it failed in 2016 and 2017.

**Ugaas-led intervention for reconciliation:** the Xawaadle Ugaas can take the charge for an internal reconciliation among the Xawaadle clan in the first place. He can work on community trust restoration by acknowledging the casualties and crimes that were committed against society and not simply sweeping these under the rug. A public apology and sympathy to those affected by the insecurity can go far in remedying their grievances before more high-level reconciliation can begin. In addition to that, involving the Ugaas and other clan elders can bring legitimacy to Hirshabelle State. The elders are the main stakeholders in the political arena, and the Xawaadle Ugaas is unmatched in terms of social acceptance to serve their interests. It is thus crucial to get them on board for fruitful reconciliation. Likewise, the clans other than the Xawaadle in the Hiiraan region should work on drawing the two parties together and become more active in local reconciliations.

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