

# MINOR DEMARCATIONS, MICRO-DAMS— MAJOR DRAMA?

ETHNO-TERRITORIAL EXPANSIONISM AND  
PRECARIOUS PEACE IN THE OROMIA-SOMALI  
BORDERLANDS OF EASTERN ETHIOPIA

Jonah Wedekind and Kedir Jamal

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**Rift Valley Institute**  
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## THE ETHIOPIA PEACE RESEARCH FACILITY

This report was written for the Ethiopia Peace Research Facility (PRF) and is part of its Knowledge for Peace (K4P) series on contested borderlands. The PRF is an independent facility combining timely analysis on peace and conflict from Ethiopian experts with support for conflict-sensitive programming in the country. It is managed by the Rift Valley Institute (RVI) and funded by the UK government.

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## MAP DESIGN

Zerihun Cherie

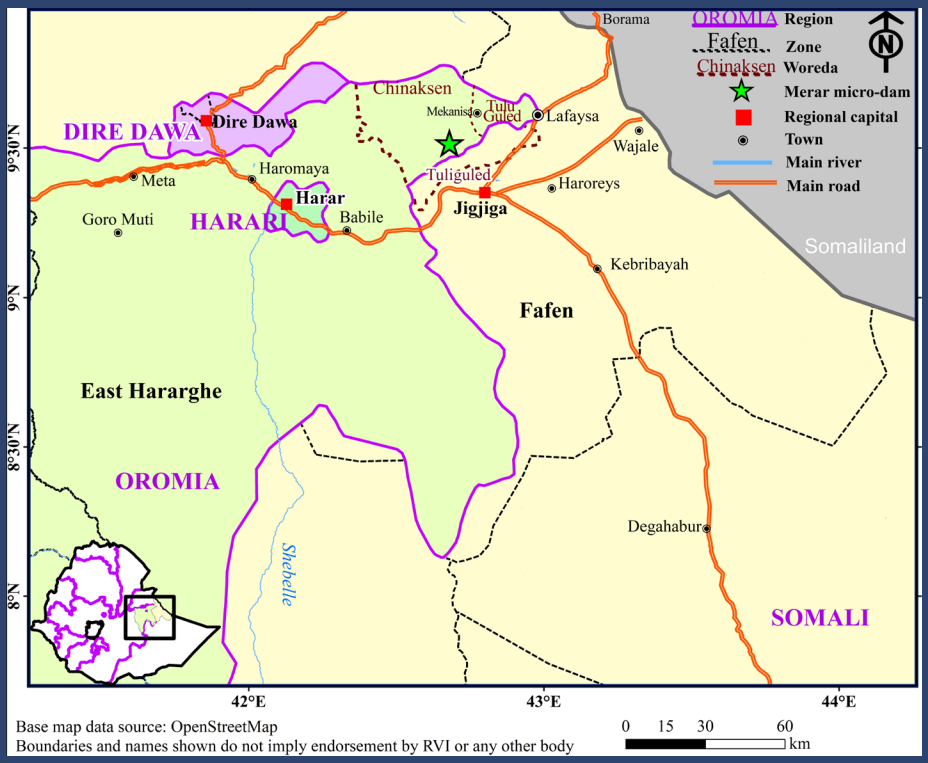
## DESIGN/LAYOUT

Maggie Dougherty

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MAP



# SUMMARY

- In Ethiopia, Oromia Regional State (ORS) and Somali Regional State (SRS) remain locked in latent competition to consolidate administrative control over contested areas along their shared border. This is the longest internal regional state border in the Horn of Africa, which was subject to violent conflict and a displacement crisis in 2017–2019.
- The creation of borders for historically fluid identities under ethnic federalism and the displacement crisis during the 2017–2018 political transition has shaped conflict dynamics across the eastern Oromia–Somali regional frontier along the road from Harar to Jigjiga, where the flow of people, goods and capital is vital for both local livelihoods and the national economy.
- Despite relative peace and stability in the eastern borderlands, and between the ORS and SRS under the Prosperity Party (PP) government since 2019, the potential for conflict remains as tensions over unclear boundary demarcations, which have existed since the 2004 regional border referendum, are still largely unresolved.
- Recent reforms to sub-regional administrative units in the Oromia–Somali borderlands have increased intercommunal tensions, spurred on by regional state competition over resources and revenues. These reforms are perceived as regional expansionism. In 2023, unilateral actions by the two regional state administrations resulted in a flare up of border tensions.
- Intercommunal tensions are aggravated by regional state economic interests in securing resources in and revenues from the contested eastern regional borderlands, including through the construction of micro-dams for irrigated wheat farming, which also serve the parallel political purpose of gaining or maintaining administrative control of the contested territories.
- Given the geographic proximity of the north-eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands (and the case study sites Chinaksen and Tuli Guled) to Somaliland, inter-regional state competition between the ORS and SRS (and localized conflicts between the Jarso and Gerri) can become entangled in wider transnational geopolitical projects of the Ethiopian government, such as gaining access to a port on the Red Sea.
- Whereas local communities have shown restraint and a desire for peaceful coexistence during clashes between ORS and SRS militias in 2023, negotiations for peace and stability typically play out at the regional level, which tends to co-opt or sideline community-level peacebuilding. Efforts to transform the tensions arising from the expansionist politics of the two regional states into peaceful coexistence remain crucial for fostering cross-border stability, including social and economic exchange between the borderland communities.

# INTRODUCTION

In the early days of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali's tenure in 2018, one of his most pressing internal challenges was what is known as the 'eastern problem'.<sup>1</sup> At this time, the boundary between Oromia Regional State (ORS) and Somali Regional State (SRS), the longest internal border in East Africa, had been subject to two years of intercommunal violence and internal displacement. Catalysed by clashes between regional forces from both sides, the conflict zone stretched along the more than 1,400 km long regional border—from Mieso in West Hararghe to Moyale bordering Kenya.<sup>2</sup>

From 2017–2019, the conflict displaced more than 1 million people,<sup>3</sup> constituting a third of the total number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> The timing of the conflict coincided with the 2018 political transition in the country. Resolving the eastern conflict was regarded as a key test for the then incoming prime minister, whose new government declared peacemaking a priority.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the Oromia–Somali regional borderlands have experienced relative stability, along with the repatriation of IDPs, yet this border war was simply a precursor to the internal regional and sub-regional cross-border violence that has engulfed Ethiopia in the

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- 1 Harry Verhoeven, 'An Eastern Problem for Ethiopia's new leader', *Al Jazeera*, 9 April 2018.
  - 2 Tom Gardner, 'Uneasy peace and simmering conflict: the Ethiopian town where three flags fly', *The Guardian*, 16 May 2017. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/may/16/uneasy-peace-ethiopia-three-flags-fly-oromia-somali-states-tension-ethnic-federalism>; Katrin Sowa, 'Little Dubai in the crossfire: trade corridor dynamics and ethno-territorial conflict in the Kenyan-Ethiopian border town Moyale', *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 17/3 (2023): 424–444.
  - 3 OCHA, 'Ethiopia: Oromia–Somali Conflict-Induced Displacement'. Situation Report No 4, *ReliefWeb*, 20 June 2018. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1457341/1788\\_1549032684\\_2006.pdf](https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1457341/1788_1549032684_2006.pdf); International Organization for Migration, 'Ethiopia: National Displacement Report Round 18: July–August 2019', *ReliefWeb*, 22 October 2019. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-national-displacement-report-round-18-july-august-2019>.
  - 4 World Food Programme, 'Food and Nutrition Assistance to IDPs in East and West Hararghe zones', *ReliefWeb*, 19 September 2018. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/wfp-ethiopia-food-and-nutrition-assistance-internally-displaced-persons-idps-east>.
  - 5 Other borderlands present similar litmus tests. For example, see: Sonja John, 'The Potential for Democratization in Ethiopia: The Welkait Question as a Litmus Test', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56/5 (2021): 1007–1023.

subsequent five years of Abiy's rule.<sup>6</sup>

During 2023, fresh clashes in the eastern borderlands raised fears that peace in the Oromia–Somali regional borderlands would remain elusive and that tensions between border communities and regional states could quickly resurface given unresolved territorial claims.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, with the 2024 geopolitical tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia over the pursuit of the latter of a naval port off the Red Sea coast in the Republic of Somaliland, concerns have grown that belligerent rhetoric and proxy tactics by both nations could spark intercommunal Oromo–Somali tensions and conflicts in the eastern borderlands of Ethiopia once again.

The 2017–2019 Oromia–Somali border conflict is commonly seen as having two structural root causes: 1) the 1991–1995 imposition of ethnic federalism under the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF); and 2) the 2004 border referendum. Both moves resulted in a renegotiation of the otherwise fluid Oromo and Somali identities and citizenship, as communities fell on either side of the border.<sup>8</sup> Some analysts go so far as to argue that, 'before 1991, administrative boundaries were not a serious challenge in Ethiopia',<sup>9</sup> even though conflicts over bordered territories and resources between Somali and Oromo groups preceded EPRDF rule, dating back to both the Derg and the imperial administrations with their shifting border regimes. Nevertheless, the EPRDF's imposition of multinational federalism and the demarcation of regional state administrative boundaries between ethnic groups went against the grain of the lived realities of Oromo–Somali borderland communities whose identities were fluid and who treated territorial boundaries as flexible.<sup>10</sup> Bordering along ethnic lines resulted in increasingly bifurcated claims to territory and recurrent

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- 6 Tom Gardner, 'Shadow falls over Ethiopia Reforms as Warnings of Crisis Go Unheeded', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2019. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/mar/14/shadow-falls-over-ethiopia-reforms-warnings-of-crisis-ignored-abiy-ahmed>.
  - 7 'Civilians killed in clashes between militias from Oromia and residents of Somali region after dispute over dam construction', *Addis Standard*, 20 January 2023. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-civilians-killed-in-clashes-between-militias-from-romia-and-residents-of-somali-region-after-dispute-over-dam-construction/>; 'Fresh clashes near Oromia–Somali regions border claim lives, Oromia gov't dismisses allegations', *Addis Standard*, 17 March 2023. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-fresh-clashes-near-romia-somali-regions-border-claim-lives-romia-govt-dismisses-allegation-of-security-forces-involvement/>; 'Several killed, many injured in fresh clashes in Babile near Oromia, Somali regions border', *Addis Standard*, 21 September 2023. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-several-killed-many-injured-in-fresh-clashes-in-babile-near-romia-somali-regions-border/>.
  - 8 Asnake Kefale, 'Federal Restructuring in Ethiopia: Renegotiating Identity and Borders along the Oromo–Somali Ethnic Frontiers', *Development and Change* 41/4 (2010): 615–635.
  - 9 Adane Kassie et al., 'Understanding administrative boundary related conflicts and their challenges in Ethiopia since 1991', *Cogent Social Sciences* 9/2 (2023), 2.
  - 10 Tobias Hagmann and Mustafe M Abdi, 'Inter-ethnic violence in Ethiopia's Somali Regional State, 2017–2018', Conflict Research Programme, London: London School of Economics and Political Science, March 2020. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Inter-ethnic-conflicts-SRS-Final-April-2020.pdf>.



episodes of conflict in the borderlands. While taking the lasting effects of ethnic federalism into account, this analysis mainly focuses on the effects that the post-2018 administrative changes under the Prosperity Party (PP) have had on igniting or mitigating conflict.

In the multinational federation of Ethiopia, institutionalized resource and revenue competition between regional states continues to risk both instigating cross-border conflicts and undermining peacebuilding. This is the case in the Oromia–Somali borderlands, where ethnicity and clan lineage are strategically mobilized or pitted against one another by political entrepreneurs who seek to gain administrative control over territory and economic opportunities (access to resources and revenues) in these contested borderlands. Structurally, such administrative–territorial control is then maintained through the bordering of otherwise fluid identities (for example, Oromo–Somali multi-ethnic groups) and the hardening of previously flexible boundaries (for example, the Oromia–Somali regional border) that are contested and claimed by two competing regional states. Each side thus not only seeks to create facts on the ground through territorial encroachments; for example, via the unilateral creation of new administrative units or the construction of micro-dams (as the case study in this report shows).<sup>11</sup> They also aim to entrench identities by demographically bolstering the physical presence or conjuring up the symbolic belonging of favoured ethnic and clan groups within a disputed borderland territory.

This report investigates a brief uptick in violence in 2023 in the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands after a period of relative stability since the post-2018 emerging political settlement in Ethiopia. The first case looks into the inter-clan (Jarso–Gerri) and inter-regional state (Oromia–Somali) contestation that re-emerged with the creation of a new administrative unit, Mekanisa, by the Oromia regional state (ORS). Mekanisa was formerly part of Chinaksen woreda (district) but was disconnected from the ORS landmass, encircled by territory of the Somali regional state (SRS) since the 2004 border referendum. The second case relates to violent clashes and political controversy that emerged over the building of a micro-dam by the ORS in the vicinities Chinaksen and Tuli Guled. The micro-dam is to enable agricultural irrigating in the Deda Waled valley, a territory that was historically shared (and fought over) between the Jarso and Gerri clans. Under Abiy Ahmed, the Ethiopian government intends to grow wheat in the Deda Waled on a large scale as part of a national wheat-autarky campaign.

The report highlights the overlapping claims to and distributive struggles over territory and resources in the Oromia–Somali borderlands which animated inter-regional competition between the ORS and SRS, resulted in the brief 2023 uptick in violence between the Jarso and Gerri clans, and which potentially pose a risk to previous local peace processes. The report also considers how relatively minor moves, such as re-demarcating or up-scaling administrative units or introducing development projects (e.g. micro-dams for irrigation and wheat production) in the contested Oromia–Somali regional territories can have major consequences—particularly if they should become embroiled in wider geopolitical projects by the Ethiopian government and

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11 In other words, they seek to gain *de facto* possession of a territory with the aim of attaining *de jure* ownership over time.

corresponding shifts in transnational alliances. The report cautions that there is a risk that local tensions in the Oromia–Somali borderlands can be reignited and destabilize the precarious local peace settlement if clan alliances that stretch across the Ethio–Somaliland and Ethio–Somali borderlands are ensnared in the Ethiopian government’s attempts to gain direct access to a port on the Red Sea.<sup>12</sup>

## RESEARCH CONCEPTS

In considering the tensions and conflicts in the Oromia–Somali borderlands, the report conceptualizes borders as resources.<sup>13</sup> Despite manifesting social and spatial divisions, borders bear material and symbolic opportunities for different actors which expand or limit their political-economic gains or losses. Rather than constituting mere constraints, borderlands also represent zones of opportunity.<sup>14</sup> This implies that even if borders spatially divide people, they also animate them to seek ways to work with or overcome the hurdles that borders present. The socio-cultural, economic and political frictions that the creation, consolidation and contestation of formal borders tend to generate can be called ‘frontier energetics’.<sup>15</sup> Such frictions are common in ‘entangled landscapes’, where administrative rule is the result not of a succession of new administrative designations and boundaries that overwrite previous power relations but rather the result of a ‘sedimentation’ or ‘reworking’ of old and new ones.<sup>16</sup>

When contested border spaces are subject to changes (for example, due to the establishment of new administrative units, border demarcations, etc.), borderland communities, state officials and other actors (elders, activists, etc.) and economic entrepreneurs (smallholders, pastoralists, traders, etc.) react in different ways, depending on their circumstances and how they perceive the impact of these changes on their situation.<sup>17</sup> In Ethiopia’s multinational federal order, various actors thus seek to wield their connections across the hierarchies of the federal state in order to strengthen or shift their political or ethnic alliances and relative position to administrative power holders (party members, government officials, etc.) in order to gain from

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- 12 Biruk Terreffe, ‘Ethiopia’s Red Sea Politics: Corridors, ports and security in the Horn of Africa’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2025.
  - 13 Christophe Sohn, ‘Borders as Resources: Towards a Centring of the Concept’, in *A Research Agenda for Border Studies*, ed. James W Scott, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020.
  - 14 Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands as Resources in the Horn of Africa*, Rochester: James Currey, 2010.
  - 15 John Galaty, ‘Frontier Energetics: The Value of Pastoralist Border Crossings in Eastern Africa’, in *Nomad-State Relationships in International Relations: Before and After Borders*, ed. Jamie Levin, 101–122, Cham: Springer, 2020. For use of the concept in context of the Oromia–Somali regional borderlands, see: John Galaty, ‘Boundary-Making and Pastoral Conflict along the Kenyan–Ethiopian Borderlands’, *African Studies Review* 59/1 (2016): 97–122.
  - 16 Donald Moore, *Suffering for Territory: Race, Place, and Power in Zimbabwe*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2005, 3.
  - 17 Boku Tache and Gufu Oba, ‘Policy-Driven Inter-Ethnic Conflicts in Southern Ethiopia’, *Review of African Political Economy* 36/121 (2009).

impending, ongoing or recent administrative changes or, inversely, to minimize if not reverse potential losses.<sup>18</sup> On one hand, this means that border contestations and conflicts vary in form, as well as in terms of the involved actors, and the scale of intensity and incidents. On the other hand, it may also result in the use of different types and levels of administrative institutions and mechanisms that are accessed to negotiate or resolve the resulting border contestations and conflicts.<sup>19</sup>

During processes of reforms to regional (*kilil*) and sub-regional administrative units (*zone*, *woreda*, *kebele*)<sup>20</sup> and their boundaries (through re-spacing or re-mapping processes),<sup>21</sup> the distribution of political powers and economic benefits (administrative rights and powers, access to resources and revenue streams, ability to traverse borders, etc.), as well as social situations (ethnic and clan identities and alliances) is subject to heightened levels of renegotiation and reconfiguration. This can reshape the fortunes both of individual economic actors or collective ethnic and clan groups, as well as of sub-regional administrative units and entire regional states. This is likely to lead to claims, contestations and conflicts over boundaries of territories and resources (that is, distributive struggles) as different actors seek to benefit or limit losses from administrative changes.<sup>22</sup>

Internal cross-regional tensions and conflicts are often portrayed as primordial ethnic clashes or competition over scarce resources in borderlands.<sup>23</sup> Seemingly complex, they are often also simplified as top-down, elite-driven conflicts or as instigated by what is referred to as the ‘deep state’.<sup>24</sup> While ethnicity, among other identity factors (clan lineage, religion, etc.), and resource claims may be invoked in such conflicts, this analysis aims to capture the full spectrum of interacting factors that play into and shape the situations, strategies and struggles of individuals and collective groups as the administrative governance of borders becomes subject to change.<sup>25</sup>

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18 Dereje and Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands*.

19 John G McPeack and Peter Little, ‘Mobile Peoples, Contested Borders: Land use conflicts and resolution mechanisms among Borana and Guji Communities, Southern Ethiopia’, *World Development* 103 (2018).

20 The word ‘woreda’ refers to a third-level administrative unit (a district). The word ‘kebele’ refers to the lowest-level administrative unit (a village or neighbourhood).

21 Wendy James et al., eds., *Re-mapping Ethiopia: Socialism and After*, Oxford: James Currey / Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002; Benedikt Korf, Tobias Hagmann and Rony Emmenegger, ‘Re-spacing African drylands’, *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42/5 (2015).

22 Dereje and Hoehne, *Borders and Borderlands*.

23 Tobias Hagmann and Alemmaya Mulugeta, ‘Pastoral Conflicts and State-Building in the Ethiopian Lowlands’, *Africa Spectrum* 43/1 (2008).

24 In the Ethiopian context, the term ‘deep state’ was long defined as ‘the intelligence service, the military and the TPLF-associated economic complex’. See: Annette Weber, ‘Abiy Superstar-Reformer or Revolutionary. Hope for Transformation in Ethiopia’, SWP Comment No 26, July 2018. Accessed 27 February 2025, [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C26\\_web.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2018C26_web.pdf).

25 Asebe Regassa, ‘Competing orders and conflicts at the margins of the State: Inter-group conflicts along the Ethiopia-Kenya border’, *African Journal on Conflict Resolution* 16/2 (2016).

Conceptualizing internal regional state borders as resources around which distributive struggles choreograph in the multinational federation of Ethiopia opens our analysis to the relations between actors (agency) in the borderlands and across the hierarchies of the federal state (structure).

## METHODOLOGY

The research upon which this report is based was carried out between December 2023 and February 2024 in the SRS and the ORS, including along the A10 trade route that traverses the eastern borderlands and in Jigjiga, Chinaksen, Babelle and Harar. Fieldwork is concentrated on the recent clashes that followed two events: 1) the upgrading of the Mekanisa administrative unit; and 2) the construction of the Merar micro-dam by the ORS government in the contested territories between Chinaksen in East Hararghe zone (ORS) and Jigjiga, Fafen zone (SRS), an area historically shared and contested between the Jarso and the Gerri.

The research methodology mainly consists of key informant interviews, which constitute the primary data upon which the study is based. These interviews were conducted with a range of actors, including: government officials, security personnel, elders, traders, civilians, refugees and NGO representatives, as well as local experts. The interviews were complemented with secondary data collected from relevant government documents; for example, government communiqués, policy plans and maps. This data is also supplemented with news reports, documentaries and social media posts discussing the border conflicts, which were analysed to capture contending narratives. The research also draws on direct observation and expertise in the area since 2014, with specific attention to the conflict dynamics following the 2018 political transition.<sup>26</sup>

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26 Kedir Jamal, 'Religion and Conflict in Dire Dawa: Intercommunal tensions and opportunities for peace', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Jonah Wedekind, 'Anatomy of a White Elephant: Investment Failure and Land Conflicts on Ethiopia's Oromia-Somali Frontier', in *Lands of the Future: Anthropological Perspectives on Pastoralism, Land Deals and Tropes of Modernity in Eastern Africa*, ed. Echi Christina Gabbert et al., New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021.

# CONFLICT CONTEXT

The administrative changes in the Oromia–Somali regional borderlands under the Prosperity Party (PP) government are best understood in their geographic and historical context. To better assess the contemporary risks of a potential destabilization of the relative peace in the Oromia–Somali regional borderlands, under the PP government it is useful to examine the recent history of administrative changes and inter-regional conflicts in East Ethiopia. This includes three relevant changes: 1) the 1991–1994 transition to ethnic federalism; 2) the 2004 border referendum; and 3) the 2017–2019 border war and the subsequent IDP (internally displaced person) crisis.

## TRANSITIONAL PERIOD: 1991–1994

Conflicts in the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands did not first emerge with ethnic federalism, which was instituted with the constitution of 1995. Rather, ‘old struggles...have been given a new frame of reference’ since 1991.<sup>27</sup> During the Derg regime, Hararghe province, which included much of the current eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands, was subject to overlapping territorial struggles between contending nationalist projects of Somali irredentism (Greater Somalia), Ethiopian sovereignty and Oromo nationalism. This saw the Ogaden war (1977–1978) between Ethiopia and Somalia, as well as the emergence of insurgent fronts in eastern Ethiopia. These included the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF), the military wing of which was established in the eastern Chercher highlands, to struggle for an Oromo republic. At this time, the Somali republic also created and backed the Western Somali Liberation Front (WSLF), with the aim of integrating Oromo-speaking Somalis in Ethiopia under the banner of Greater Somalia.

During the 1980s, the Derg regime struggled to address the shifting internal Oromo and Somali territorial claims rooted in ethnic identity in eastern Ethiopia, even though various ethnic liberation fronts were all striving for national liberation; for example, the OLF, WSLF and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF). These struggles ultimately coalesced with other ethnic liberation fronts across Ethiopia and culminated in the overthrow of the Derg in 1991. Following a transitional period of government, the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) established a multinational federation in 1995.

While there were nationalist struggles and a related ethnicization of conflict under the Derg regime in what was then Hararghe province, these were often not framed in terms of Oromo–

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27 Fekadu Adugna Tufa, ‘Overlapping nationalist projects and contested spaces: the Oromo–Somali borderlands in southern Ethiopia’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5/4 (2011): 773–775.

Somali conflicts.<sup>28</sup> Instead, a common narrative across the region is that ethnic conflicts during the Derg and imperial eras were rare. After 1991, however, this changed:

Some of the conflicts over grazing land, water and resources between communities had a long history that predated the new federal system, but the post-1991 political development seems to have changed the dimension of the conflict. The fact that the disputed areas coincided with the boundaries between regional governments seems to have transformed the conflict between local communities to conflicts between regional states.<sup>29</sup>

While disputes over grazing land and water points were prevalent in Hararghe province, these were typically resolved by community leaders using customary mechanisms.<sup>30</sup> In the Oromo–Somali co-inhabited areas, the period of statelessness following the sudden departure of Derg officials in early 1991 likewise meant that ‘disputes were solved locally by elders and nobody seemed to miss the state very much’.<sup>31</sup> In the shadows of this anarchic interregnum, however, ethnically based political movements anticipated the return of the state and jostled for a say or share in the territorial and administrative reconfiguration of the Oromia and Somali regional states under the EPRDF.<sup>32</sup> The Oromia and Somali regional states were given territory that was vastly different from the shifting Hararghe province borderlines under the imperial and Derg regimes. The 1992 border that demarcated these two regions under the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) remained subject to conflicts between various groups and disputes between the Oromia Regional State (ORS) and the Somali Regional State (SRS) governments for more than a decade, resulting in calls for a border referendum.

## **BORDER REFERENDUM: 2004**

The roots of the Oromia–Somali regional borderland conflict are commonly found in the 2004 border referendum. The referendum was held to settle the disputed administration of more than 30 woredas, with more than 400 kebeles, between both regional states. The aim of the plebiscite was to rectify the contested demarcation of regional borders that had emerged between the Oromia and Somali regions and their borderland Oromo–Somali communities, with the implementation of ethnic federalism in 1991–1994. Around 80 per cent of the border communities, many of which identify as both Oromo and Somali, speak both languages and

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28 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.

29 Assefa Fiseha, ‘Intra-Unit Minorities in the Context of Ethno-National Federation in Ethiopia’, *Utrecht Law Review* 13/1 (2017), 175.

30 Fekadu Beyene, ‘Pastoralists and Violent Conflict along the Oromia–Somali Border in Eastern Ethiopia: Institutional Options toward Peacebuilding’, *African Studies Review* 65/2 (2022).

31 Günther Schlee and Abdullahi A. Shongolo, ‘Local War and Its Impact on Ethnic and Religious Identification in Southern Ethiopia’, *GeoJournal* 36/1 (1995), 10.

32 Gufu Oba, *Nomads in the Shadows of Empires: Contests, Conflicts and Legacies on the Southern Ethiopian–Northern Kenyan Frontier*, Leiden: Brill, 2013.

share religious, cultural and kinship ties, voted to become part of the ORS, which won more than 300 kebeles. The final result announced by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) frustrated the SRS, which only gained a little more than 90 kebeles.

Less than a year after the 2004 referendum, border skirmishes had displaced ‘tens of thousands’ according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), which states that ‘the October 2004 referendum in the border areas of the Somali and Oromia regions only served to exacerbate tensions between communities’.<sup>33</sup> Over time, the referendum drove a wedge between Oromo–Somali borderland communities, hardening their ethnic identities and increasing resource and land conflicts along the border. These were further stirred by arbitrary violent incursions by the Somali regional police (*Liyyu*). Abdi Mohamoud Omar (also known as Abdi Iley), who became regional president of the SRS in 2010, had been instrumental in setting up the *Liyyu* police around 2007–2008, initially as a way to regionally counter the insurgency of the ONLF.<sup>34</sup> However, he increasingly deployed the *Liyyu* to also violently contest the territorial losses to the ORS. In the following years, the SRS government consolidated its control over the regional cross-border *khat*<sup>35</sup> trade, while the Oromo side set up agricultural investment projects along the contested borderlands of the East and West Hararghe zones to create facts on the ground by establishing a tangible presence in the lower-tier administrative units (woredas and kebeles) that Oromia had won in the referendum.<sup>36</sup>

### OROMIA–SOMALI REGIONAL BORDER WAR: 2017–2019

Between 2017 and 2019, long simmering tensions along the Oromo–Somali regional border erupted in clashes between paramilitary forces from both regions, resulting in an IDP crisis. The clashes also accompanied and animated the political transition from the EPRDF to the PP. These clashes emerged in the wake of the Oromo *qeerroo* (Oromo youth activists) youth uprisings that began in 2014. Initially, the protests were organized against the Addis Ababa master plan. Over the next three years, they spread across much of the Oromia region, including East and West Hararghe zones. The Oromo youth movement mounted pressure on the EPRDF—and its dominant coalition member, the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)—which was seen to dominate the political, economic and military spheres in Ethiopia. In the EPRDF coalition, a new generation of Oromo politicians around Lemma Megersa and Abiy Ahmed (also known as ‘Team Lemma’ by Oromo activists) had been reared by seasoned Oromo politicians and risen through the ranks of the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO) under the EPRDF

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33 ‘Ethiopia: Border war and ethnic clashes leave over 150,000 internally displaced’, IDMC Situation Report, *ReliefWeb*, 13 May 2005. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-border-war-and-ethnic-clashes-leave-over-150000-internally-displaced>.

34 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Talking Peace in the Ogaden: The search for an end to conflict in the Somali Regional State in Ethiopia’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2014.

35 *Khat* is a mildly narcotic plant (*Catha edulis*) native to the Horn of Africa.

36 Wedekind, ‘Anatomy’.

youth programme, known as *metekakat* (generational shift).<sup>37</sup> Team Lemma sided with the *qeerroos* and labelled TPLF-affiliated political actors as ‘thieves and robbers’ who had ‘launched a war against Oromia and its administration’ in 2017.<sup>38</sup> The accusation was levelled against the then SRS president, Abdi Iley, who was said to have utilized the *Liyu* forces to rule the SRS as a personal fiefdom. In contrast to the OPDO, his Somali People’s Democratic Party (SPDP) was only a peripheral affiliate (*agar*) of the EPRDF and never a coalition member. Nonetheless, he enjoyed the backing of the TPLF leadership to ensure his control over rival Somali clans and access to resources in the region, including oil and gas, as well as revenue streams from the *khat* trade.<sup>39</sup> In an effort to securitize the region and compete with its Somali counterpart, the new Oromo leadership also embarked on expanding its paramilitary forces, the Oromia regional forces or special police (also known as *Liyu hail*), which rivalled the size of the SRS *Liyu* by 2017.<sup>40</sup>

Fearing the growing interference of the newly empowered Oromo elites, Abdi Iley sought to engage his forces in order to weaken the new position of Oromia. In this, he was supported by the old guard of TPLF hardliners who supported the battles as a proxy to quell the Oromo protests and politicians that contested their hold on power and privileges at the centre. The northern parts of the Oromia–Somali borderlands, East and West Hararghe zones (Oromia) and Fafen and Erer zones (Somali), experienced serious clashes between regional forces from both sides. This resulted in up to 1 million IDPs from all along the more than 1,400 km long Oromia–Somali regional border, making this one of the largest IDP crises in the world in 2017.<sup>41</sup> Within months of Abiy Ahmed becoming prime minister in 2018, Abdi Iley was removed from regional power by federal forces.

Under Abiy Ahmed’s government, the new regional president of the SRS, Mustafe Omer, and his counterpart in the ORS, Shimelis Abdisa, sought to establish peace between the affected borderland communities, secure the unclearly demarcated border and resettle the IDPs. Numerous peace conferences held at regional and local level between 2019 and 2022 were crucial for achieving and maintaining relative peace and stability on the Oromia–Somali border. This is in contrast to a proliferation of inter-regional and inter-ethnic conflicts across

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37 Terrence Lyons, ‘Generational Shift May Shake Up Ethiopian Politics After Meles Zenawi’, *World Politics Review*, 25 April 2013; Terrence Lyons, *The Puzzle of Ethiopian Politics*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2019.

38 Lemma Megersa, ‘We Have Wounded the Beast, and that Isn’t Enough’, *Oromia Broadcasting Network*, 4 December 2017, <https://videopress.com/v/6Qr3kc5H>.

39 Juweria Ali, ‘Squeezing the Ogaden Basin: Power and Protracted Oil and Gas Exploration in the Somali Region’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2023; Mustafe M Abdi, ‘Regularly Irregular: Varieties of Informal Trading in the Ethiopia-Somaliland Borderlands’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2021; Mustafe M Abdi, ‘Fixing the Price: The Politics of Khat Trade Between Ethiopia and Somaliland’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute/XCEPT, 2022.

40 Assefa Fiseha, ‘Federalism and Security: The Special Police in Ethiopia’, *Journal of Autonomy and Security Studies* 6/2 (2022).

41 OCHA, ‘Situation Report No 4’; IOM, ‘Displacement Report Round 18’.



the federation since 2019. Despite preaching national unity and debating ways to overcome problems with the ethnic federal constitutional order, as well as setting up the Administrative Boundaries and Identity Issues Commission to specifically deal with inter-ethnic and inter-regional border conflicts (some of which are long simmering) and identity-based administrative or territorial claims, the new PP government struggled to contain the outbreak of conflicts across the country. Until at least 2023, however, conflicts across the Oromia–Somali regional border remained relatively rare.

# CONTESTING CHINAKSEN: THE JARSO–GERRI CONFLICT

The Jarso–Gerri conflict is one of the main intercommunal conflicts defining recurrent border tensions along the Oromia–Somali regional border under ethnic federalism. Along with to the Borana–Garre, Guji–Gedeo clashes and others, the Jarso–Gerri conflict represents one of many local conflicts that preceded ruptures at the regional and national levels in 2018. Between 2019 and 2022, there was relative stability between the Jarso and Gerri groups but peace along the Oromia–Somali regional border remains precarious. Attempts by regional governments to unilaterally demarcate ethnic boundaries, reform sub-regional administrative units or make development interventions in the contested borderlands risk escalating tense local inter-ethnic relations and wider inter-regional ones.

The co-inhabited Jarso–Gerri areas between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled are administratively divided between the Oromia region East Hararghe zone and the Somali region Fafen zone, respectively (see map). Their territories are located in the lower plains to the west of the Karamara mountain (Karamardha, Somali spelling), 35 km to the east of which is Jiggiga, the capital of Somali Regional State (SRS). A highly arable valley between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled, referred to locally as Deda Waled, constitutes the main livelihood of both the Jarso and Gerri communities. They are mostly smallholders dependent on rainfed agriculture for sorghum, wheat and *khat* production, which contributes to inter-regional *khat* commerce. Successive regimes have seen the Deda Waled as a bread basket for eastern Ethiopia. The incumbent Prosperity Party (PP) government, for example, wants to use the valley for its national wheat cluster production initiative, once modern irrigation is developed. The obstacle to this plan is overcoming the historically recurrent territorial conflicts between the Jarso and Gerri.

## COMPETING CLAIMS TO LINEAGE AND LAND

The Jarso and Gerri clans have settled, shared and fought over the Deda Waled for more than 200 years.<sup>42</sup> Over time, they have intermarried and adopted one another's social institutions, languages (Somali and Oromo), religious (Islam) and (agri)cultural practices, and customary laws (*xeer*). The foundation of their alliance is manifest in a communal contract (*hera*), which establishes leadership roles and land distribution.<sup>43</sup> Both groups increasingly narrate their identity and claims over their shared lands differently, based on clan lineages. Consequently,

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42 Richard A Caulk, 'Harar Town and its neighbours in the nineteenth century', *Journal of African History* 18/3 (1977).

43 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024.

varying versions of ‘the Gerri-Jarso’s collective identity are contested by both insiders and outsiders, and by Oromo and Somalis alike’.<sup>44</sup>

Jarso elder respondents, who identify as Oromo, say they are descendants of Dagaa,<sup>45</sup> one of the four fraternities of the Oromo Afran Qallo confederacy (Ala, Oborra, Babille, Dagaa).<sup>46</sup> They say that Gerri agropastoralists were adopted by the Jarso, who originally settled in the Deda Waled plains between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled in the foothills of Mount Karamara, where the Jarso have since maintained a majority and shared the territories with the Gerri.<sup>47</sup> Jarso constructions of identity are rooted in their sedentary claims to ancestral land (*ona*)<sup>48</sup> but claims and counterclaims of identity linked to original landownership are pervasive.<sup>49</sup> Gerri respondents, in turn, see the Jarso as either of the Somali Dir clan or the Darood,<sup>50</sup> or they say that the Jarso assimilated late and adopted Gerri Somali language and customs.<sup>51</sup> Some Jarso, a minority of whom identify as Somali, may agree with this. As one respondent, explains, for example: ‘We resolve and mediate conflicts with the Gerri through the Somali *xeer* (customary law) shared with other Dir groups. This would not be the case if we were Oromo.’<sup>52</sup>

The Gerri claim a more noble ancestry as a sub-clan of the influential Somali Darood clan.<sup>53</sup> This sense of superiority stems from the fact that despite being in the minority, Gerri aristocrats

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44 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic conflict’, 3.

45 Shared Oromo descendency from the Dagaa is claimed by the Hume, Nole and Jarso. The Jarso are subdivided into six clans: the Sayo, Wolabu, Oromo, Oga, Dawwaro and Dhanqa, with the latter holding the most influential administrative positions in the past. Not all Jarso families subscribe to an Oromo lineage, given the alliance with the Somali Gerri-Kombe. Some elders offer accounts of their Somali lineages with the Jarso comprised of six sub-branches, among which one descendant is called ‘Oromoo’.

46 Thomas Osmond, ‘Competing Muslim Legacies along City/Countryside Dichotomies: Another Political History of Harar Town and Its Oromo Rural Neighbours in Eastern Ethiopia’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 52/1 (2014).

47 Interview with former Chinaksen kebele administrator, Jigjiga, 20 December 2023; phone interview with Somali-Jarso elder, 23 January 2024.

48 Jeylan W Hussein et al., ‘Sociocognitive Processes in the Construction of Identity and Conflict between the Jarso and Girhi in Eastern Ethiopia’, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 5/2 (2015).

49 Jeylan W Hussein et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality and Governance Challenges in the Geography of Networked Human Connectivity: The Jarso-Girhi Case in Eastern Ethiopia’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 52/2 (2017).

50 A common claim made by the Gerri is that a Jarso minority are a sub-clan of Balcad-Darood and that the Jarso majority are sub-clans of the Dir. These were adopted into the Afran Qallo confederation, thus becoming Oromo.

51 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024.

52 Interview with Jarso scholar, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

53 Along with the Harla and Harti, the Gerri are a sub-clan of the Darood, removed only by the Kombe and Kablelah. The Gerri have 12 sub-clans of which the Bahawiyyo has been the most dominant. See: Guido Ambroso, ‘Clanship, Conflict and Refugees: An Introduction to Somalis in the Horn of Africa’, Hargeisa: UNHCR Sub-Office, NW Somalia, 2002.

held administrative power in the imperial era until it was eroded under the Derg and the Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF).<sup>54</sup> Gerri scholars note, however, that differentiating Gerri-Jarso identity on the ‘basis of ancestry’ is just as faulty as demarcating the borders of their land on the ‘basis of administration’ because ‘over the course of history, through intermarriage and shared livelihoods, we have become one and the same’.<sup>55</sup>

Views on Jarso–Gerri identity among fellow Somali clans in the SRS and beyond are also divided. Unless politically useful, the Ogadeeni (descendants from the Darood who dominate political affairs in the SRS administration and opposition) downplay Jarso–Gerri feuds as intra-clan conflicts.<sup>56</sup> Neighbouring Gadabuursi of the Dir clan, who inhabit Lafaysa in the SRS and Awdal in Somaliland, consider the Jarso to be Dir but also recognize their Oromo bond and view the conflicts as an ‘Oromo–Somali elite affair’.<sup>57</sup> Oromo elders, in contrast, embrace the Jarso as one of their clans under the indigenous Gadaa branch system.<sup>58</sup> Oromo politicians also label the Jarso as Oromo in the interest of governing their territory as part of Oromia Regional State (ORS) based on the 2004 referendum.<sup>59</sup> Some scholars emphasize the historic Jarso–Gerri interconnectedness and characterize both as ‘ethnically mixed Oromo and Somali, practicing agriculture using Oromo farming techniques but possessing Somali social institutions’.<sup>60</sup> Others note that their shared identities have been divided and hardened over time due to competing ethno-political projects and resource struggles.<sup>61</sup> Generally, Gerri–Jarso contestations over ethnic belonging, political power and territorial access have come to the fore or turned violent in times of broader national political conjunctures that present opportunities for either group to challenge the status quo or improve their situation.<sup>62</sup>

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- 54 Ahmed Y Farah, ‘The Plight and Prospects of Ethiopia’s Lowland Pastoral Groups’, in *Search of Cool Ground: War, Flight and Homecoming in Northeast Africa*, ed. Tim Allen, London: James Currey, 1996, 134.
- 55 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024; interview with former Chinaksen kebele administrator and community leader, Jijiga, 20 December 2023. Also see: Jeylan et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality’, 239
- 56 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.
- 57 Interview with independent Somali academic, Jijiga, 21 January 2024.
- 58 The Gadaa branch system is a highly integrative one in which being and becoming Oromo is possible. See: PTW Baxter et al., ‘Being and Becoming Oromo: Historical and Anthropological Enquiries’, Uppsala and Stockholm: Nordic Africa Institute, 1996.
- 59 ‘Dookumantarii Seenaa Aanaa Cinaaksan’ (‘Documentary on the history of the Dida Waled Valley and the 16th anniversary of the establishment of Chinaksen district’), *Fana Broadcasting Corporate Afaan Oromoo*, 12 October 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H72YXErCBv8&ab\\_channel=FBCAfaanOromoo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H72YXErCBv8&ab_channel=FBCAfaanOromoo).
- 60 Ezekiel Gebissa, *Leaf of Allah: Khat and Agricultural Transformation in Hararge, Ethiopia, 1875–1991*, Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 2004, 36. This view is echoed by a Somali Gerri scholar during an interview: Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024.
- 61 Jeylan W Hussein et al., ‘The Political Ecology of Resource-Based Inter-Ethnic Violence: The Case of the Jarso and the Girihi in Eastern Ethiopia’, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 51/4 (2016).
- 62 This argument is perhaps best articulated by Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.

## HISTORICAL JUNCTURES IN JARSO-GERRI RELATIONS

Inequality in intercommunal Jarso–Gerri divisions first became pronounced with the forcible incorporation of their territories into the Ethiopian empire following the conquest of Harar<sup>63</sup> and Hararghe in the late nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup> In the early twentieth century, aristocratic Gerri *garad* (clan chiefs) were made feudal administrators over the Jarso–Gerri territories under Hararghe province,<sup>65</sup> with the Jarso becoming subordinate tenants. Gerri dominance waned under the Italian colonial administration, which allowed the Jarso to appoint their own *garad* as the representatives of their villages (*damini*).<sup>66</sup> Under the 1975 Derg land reforms, the Jarso gained a more equal status in terms of land access, while the Gerri felt further alienated.<sup>67</sup>

Both were drawn into the Ethio–Somali War (1977 to 1978), with Jarso–Gerri territories becoming a battleground during the final battle in Karamara, where Derg forces repelled those of Siad Barre,<sup>68</sup> largely ending the struggle for a Greater Somalia.<sup>69</sup> With the subsequent rise of ethno-nationalist counterinsurgencies against the Derg, the legacy of the war caused a further rift: In 1981–1982, the first major inter-clan fighting broke out between the Gerri and Jarso, who were drawn to opposing Somali and Oromo nationalist liberation fronts and their overlapping territorial claims.<sup>70</sup> In the interregnum of the Derg’s fall, and with the Transitional Government of Ethiopia (TGE) slow to build up its security and administrative control along the Oromia–Somali ethnic frontier, some Gerri sub-clans sought to restore their former standing as the original *garad* landowners.<sup>71</sup>

Between 1990–1992, the Gerri allied themselves with the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF), anticipating that the Ogadeeni (fellow Darood) would assume leadership of the SRS under ethnic federalism.<sup>72</sup> The exposure to Darood dominance distressed the Jarso,<sup>73</sup> as did their

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63 Richard Caulk, ‘Menelik’s conquest and local leaders in Harar’, paper presented at the History and Culture of the Peoples of Harar Province conference, Addis Ababa, June 1975.

64 Mohammed Hassen, ‘Testing the thesis of the Invention of Ethiopia: Reinterpreting Menelik’s Conquest of Harerge and Its Impact on the Oromo, 1887–1900’, *Journal of Oromo Studies* 18/1 (2011).

65 The imperial Hararghe province encompasses the contemporary Harar, East and West Hararghe zones as well as the SRS. See: Tim Carmichael, ‘Approaching Ethiopian History: Addis Abāba and Local Governance in Harār, c. 1900 to 1950’, PhD thesis, Michigan State University, Ann Arbor, 2001.

66 Cedric Barnes, ‘The Somali Political Economy in Eastern Ethiopia, Circa 1941–1948’, in *Putting the Cart Before the Horse: Contested nationalism and the crisis of the nation-state in Somalia*, ed. Abdi Kusow, Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2004.

67 Their territories were administered by the state as a Jigjiga sub-province.

68 Gebru Tareke, ‘The Ethiopia–Somalia War of 1977 Revisited’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 33/3 (2000).

69 Fekadu, ‘Overlapping nationalist projects’.

70 Jeylan et al., ‘Sociocognitive Processes’.


71 Schlee and Shongolo, ‘Local War’.

72 Asnake, ‘Federal Restructuring’.

73 Jeylan et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality’.

perceived ostracization from the ONLF, which gave the Gerri exclusive rights to represent both clans.<sup>74</sup> Consequently, the Jarso first sought membership in the Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia (IFLO) or the Oromo Liberation Front (OLF),<sup>75</sup> depending where they were located. They later considered the benefits of representation in the Oromo Peoples Democratic Organization (OPDO).<sup>76</sup> In 1992, competition between both nationalist movements was fought out for six months over the shared Deda Waled territory claimed by both clans under the flags of the ONLF and the IFLO. While the Jarso took control of Chinaksen and the Gerri of Tuli Guled, the displacement and deaths of many hundreds underscores the territoriality of the growing clan-identity cleavage. The TGE attempted reconciliation in 1994, but this only resulted in the proforma integration and representation of leaders from both clans into the newly created and EPRDF-allied Ethiopian Somali Democratic League (ESDL).<sup>77</sup> Previously administered under the Derg Jigjiga sub-province, their shared territories provisionally fell under the confines of Jigjiga zone (later renamed Fafen zone). The zone was governed under the newly established SRS<sup>78</sup> which was first ruled by the ESDL and then by its successor party, the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP), starting in 1998.<sup>79</sup>

Relative unity and peace prevailed for a decade but the administrative status of Chinaksen remained ambiguous as Jarso desires to administer their majority-held areas under the ORS grew. This was reinforced as the new balance of power under the EPRDF and ethnic federalism crystallized: the SPDP being a patrimonially subordinate and peripheral affiliate party (*agar*) nationally and a de facto one-party state catering to dominant clan and business interests regionally. Locally, 'the restructuring of the administration on an ethno-national basis was especially disadvantageous to (agro)pastoral groups that share a joint Somali-Oromo identity, such as the Gabra, Garre, Jarso, Guura, or Guji'.<sup>80</sup> All along the Oromia-Somali frontier, such

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- 74 Other families from Jarso sub-clans (e.g. the Bal'ad of the Wolabu) narrate their descendancy from Somali lineages, including the Somali Darood-Absame, instead of the Oromo Afran Qallo confederacy, to seek acceptance in the ONLF. Phone interview with Somali-Jarso elder, 23 January 2024. Also see: Jeylan et al. 'Sociocognitive Processes', 103.
- 75 Mobilization potential among the Jarso was high with the IFLO based in Bisidimo near Babilie and the OLF was founded on the Harar plateau in Chercher in 1973.
- 76 The OPDO was initially reluctant to incorporate the Jarso, seeing them as closer to the Somali on the basis of ethno-linguistic markers. Rejection by both the ONLF and the OPDO reinforced Jarso desires for an 'ethno-geographical space of their own'. Jeylan W Hussein and Fekadu Beyene, 'Dynamics of Institutionalized Competition in the Geography of Inter-Ethnic Rivalry: The Case of the Jarso and the Girhi in Eastern Ethiopia', *International Area Studies Review* 18/2 (2015), 144.
- 77 Asnake, 'Federal Restructuring'.
- 78 John Markakis, 'The Somali in the New Political Order of Ethiopia', *Review of African Political Economy* 21/59 (1994).
- 79 Following in-fighting in the ESDL, in 1997 a moderate wing of the ONLF and the remainders of the ESDL merged into the Somali People's Democratic Party (SPDP) that then ruled the SRS under the EPRDF.
- 80 Tobias Hagmann and Mohamud Khalif, 'State and Politics in Ethiopia's Somali Region since 1991', *Bildhaan* 6/6 (2008), 34.
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groups and their backers, including government officials and ethnic liberation movements from both sides, instigated intercommunal violence, nurtured overlapping territorial claims and lobbied the federal government to re-allocate local administrative units or to re-demarcate the border.<sup>81</sup> This eventually resulted in the 2004 referendum.

## REGIONAL REFERENDUM OF 2004: JARSO-GERRI CLEAVAGES

The 2004 referendum conducted for the Oromia–Somali borderlands was held by the National Election Board of Ethiopia (NEBE) in 422 contested kebeles, with 76.5 per cent voting to join the ORS and 23.5 per cent voting to join the SRS.<sup>82</sup> While ‘this result may appear an overwhelming victory by the Oromo ... deeper analysis ... reveals a different reality’.<sup>83</sup> In the case of Jigjiga zone, for example, the outcome is less clear cut, with some indicating the result as split at 60 per cent to 40 per cent (out of 84 kebeles) and others reporting 48.9 per cent to 45.5 per cent (out of 88) voting to join the ORS versus the SRS, respectively.<sup>84</sup> The Jarso overwhelmingly voted to join the ORS, with the state consequently creating Chinaksen woreda, which became a part of East Hararghe zone, while the Gerri retained Tuli Guled and other Gerri-majority kebeles under Jigjiga zone (later renamed as Fafen zone). In 2011–2012, the administratively scattered Gerri kebeles were combined into a district and in 2016, as the borderland area became a source of inter-regional contention, Abdi Iley officially scaled up Tuli Guled to woreda status.<sup>85</sup>

Ethnic tensions in 2004 and 2005 in the northeastern Oromia–Somali borderlands were a precursor to the antagonisms that the referendum had unleashed. Following the ‘administrative transfer of several villages’ between the two regions, ethnic conflicts were reported in West and East Hararghe zones, as ‘armed ethnic Somali Ethiopian troops’ raided villages in Erer district, forcing hundreds of Oromo villagers into displacement.<sup>86</sup> This was countered as several thousand ethnic Somalis were displaced from the border town of Mieso and vicinities.<sup>87</sup> In southern Ethiopia, similar clashes occurred in early 2005 between the Gabra and Guji in

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81 Hagmann and Khalif, ‘State and Politics’.

82 Fekadu, ‘Overlapping nationalist projects’.

83 Marco Bassi, ‘The Politics of Space in Borana Oromo, Ethiopia: Demographics, Elections, Identity and Customary Institutions’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 4/2 (2010), 236.

84 These percentages follow NEBE revisions; e.g. one kebele result was annulled and four kebeles were folded into one. See: <https://nebe.org.et/sites/default/files/2020-04/Oromia-and-Somali-Referendum-english.pdf>. Scholarly reports on the results are also inconsistent: e.g. Asnake, ‘Federal Restructuring’, 629 versus Jeylan et al., ‘Sociocognitive Processes’, 96.

85 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’, 3.

86 See: US Department of State, ‘Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005’, Volume 1, Washington DC: May 2006, 233. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CPRT-109JPRT26464/pdf/CPRT-109JPRT26464-Vol1.pdf>.

87 IDMC Situation Report, ‘Ethiopia’, *ReliefWeb*.

southern Borana zone, with others flaring up in 2009 between the Garre and Borana in Moyale.<sup>88</sup>

Somalis saw the referendum result as a major blow. One pundit from Tuli Guled denounced the result as an injustice and predicted that it marked only the beginning of the ‘resizing’ of the Somali region through the ‘eastward’ expansionism of Oromia.<sup>89</sup> Another narrative that spread in the wake of the referendum is that ‘the Jarso community has voted for Oromia and since then Oromia has a common boundary with Somaliland’.<sup>90</sup> With Lafaysa (Lafaciise), a Somali-Gadabuursi inhabited town in Fafen zone, however, the SRS still retained a buffer between the easternmost tip of Oromia and neighbouring Somaliland (see map). Nonetheless, such statements underscore the fears that the referendum result evoked among Ethiopian Somalis. The then SRS administration’s acquiescent acceptance of the result laid bare its weakness in the federated hierarchy of centre-periphery relations under the EPRDF. The referendum took place when the head of the federal police was an Oromo and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF)-dominated EPRDF elite was making concessions to the OPDO wing as part of internal party reforms (*tehadso*) in the early 2000s.<sup>91</sup> The federal government also dismissed SRS contestation of the result. Although the SRS administration may have been upset, the SPDP old guard was not in a strong position to respond, and a leadership change followed four years later.<sup>92</sup> When the new TPLF-backed SPDP leadership around Abdi Iley and his security circle assumed the reins of regional power in 2010, he displayed his contempt for the referendum result in an effort to appeal to pan-Somali sentiments within the clan-fractured SRS, as the *Liyu* began sporadic incursions in the borderlands in 2014.<sup>93</sup>

Locally, the referendum result created more problems than it solved for Gerri and Jarso communities. Moreover, a clear boundary between both regions in the east could not be agreed upon for re-demarcation. The votes resulted in a diffuse patchwork of kebeles, described as ‘pocket areas’ or ‘exclaves’,<sup>94</sup> that fall on opposite sides of the landmass of each region. The ORS was quick to piece together Chinaksen woreda from a patchwork of Jarso majority kebeles, some of which officially fall on the Somali side, while a handful of Gerri kebeles fall on the Oromia side.<sup>95</sup> A small minority of Jarso-dominated kebeles also voted to join the SRS, leading

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88 ‘Thousands flee Ethiopia clashes’, *BBC News*, 26 February 2009. Accessed 27 February 2025, [news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7912242.stm](https://www.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/7912242.stm).

89 Faisal Roble, ‘Somalis: You “ain’t seen nothing” yet’, *Hiraan*, 13 September 2004. Accessed 27 February 2025, [https://www.hiiraan.ca/2004/dec/op/Faisal\\_Roble.htm](https://www.hiiraan.ca/2004/dec/op/Faisal_Roble.htm).

90 Günther Schlee, ‘The Conflict Prevention and Transformation Project (CPT): Approach and Its Impact’, Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, 19 May 2006, 6–7. Accessed 17 March 2025, [https://www.eth.mpg.de/3709560/consultancy\\_report\\_may\\_2006.pdf](https://www.eth.mpg.de/3709560/consultancy_report_may_2006.pdf).

91 Merera Gudina, ‘Ethnicity, Democratization and Decentralization in Ethiopia: The Case of Oromia’, *Eastern Africa Social Science Research Review* 23/1 (2007).

92 Hagmann and Khalif, ‘State and Politics’.

93 Hagmann, ‘Talking Peace in the Ogaden’.

94 Schlee, ‘Conflict Prevention’.

95 Jeylan et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality’.



to intra-clan divisions with the new Oromo Jarso majority.<sup>96</sup> Both Jarso and Gerri minority communities existed in kebeles and towns (including Chinaksen and Tuli Guled) on either side, feeling marginalized and prone to ethnic displacement, particularly a decade later when *Liyu* incursions began. Realizing the drawbacks of this administrative patchwork arrangement as well as the divisions that it caused within and between the two clans, some kebeles that ended up geographically disconnected from their regional landmass regretted and even sought to revoke their decision.<sup>97</sup>

Between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled, the sense of marginalization was strongest in island kebeles, which are nearly or wholly engulfed by administrative units of their regional counterpart. In principle, authorities on either side could deny the movement of people and goods or prevent access to surrounding infrastructure and natural resources, including roads, farmland and water sources. Some Oromo island kebeles, for example Arbaeid,<sup>98</sup> are located more than 50 km deep into the SRS landmass. While this leaves its Jarso population stranded, it also raises suspicions that the ORS may eventually seek to create a territorial corridor that connects to its easternmost islands. Perhaps the most critical case is the Gerri-dominated town of Tuli Guled, which voted to be part of the SRS. Located 30 km south of Jigjiga, Tuli Guled is partly cut-off from the SRS landmass to the north by the ORS-administered kebeles of Gella, North Koralay, Tiro Guddo and Tura Aanod.<sup>99</sup> Apparently, this leaves Tuli Guled exposed to being fully engulfed by future Oromia advances. Likewise, there are fears in Oromo majority inhabited villages within or bordering the SRS, that they are prone to displacement and annexation, given the ambiguities of the demarcation of the border between the two regional states in the area.

Any activity, whether administrative changes (for example, upgrading from a kebele to a woreda) or infrastructure investments (for example, dam constructions), in the entangled landscapes of the Deda Waled are eyed with suspicion on all sides, be it at clan level or at local and regional administrative levels. Consequently, related local grievances and latent inter and intra-clan conflicts between Jarso–Gerri communities split by the 2004 referendum could become embroiled in inter-regional competition and spill over into violence, as happened more than a decade later.

## INTER-REGIONAL WAR: JARSO–GERRI CLASHES, 2017–2018

Between 2012 and 2014, the ORS and the SRS tried to demarcate the boundaries between the messy patchwork of administrative units. Because both state administrations put forward overlapping claims for the regional border, the Ministry of Federal Affairs and other federal

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96 Interview with Somali-Jarso elder 23 January 2024; Interview with Gerri academic 3 January 2024.

97 In interviews with officials, ORS respondents say the Gerri regret their decision, while SRS respondents say the same about the Jarso. Interview with former Chinaksen kebele administrator and community leader, Jigjiga, 20 December 2023; Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

98 Examples of Somali island kebeles in Oromia are Jafibadi and Godane.

99 Jeylan et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality’.

institutions tried to mediate. These efforts were unsuccessful, so the re-delineation process has been on hold ever since.<sup>100</sup> Consequently, cross-border incursions by the Somali *Liyu* have increased since 2014, prompting the ORS to build up and station a *Liyu hail* force of its own in border towns. In turn, this resulted in the build up of clan and kebele-based militias in the borderlands. The *qeerroo* protests against the EPRDF government in the Oromia region since 2014–2015 subsequently spread to East and West Hararghe zones in 2016, with rural towns in the Oromia–Somali borderlands becoming hotspots for discontent and administrative breakdown.<sup>101</sup> In October 2016, the EPRDF government declared a state of emergency to re-establish law and order through command-post rule and restore its waning authority.

At the time, many Hararghe border communities felt economically neglected by the ORS and insecure in the face of *Liyu* incursions from the SRS. Since early 2017, the new OPDO leadership around Lemma Mergersa and Abiy Ahmed sought to align itself with or co-opt the *qeerroos*. The new ORS leadership promised to improve the economic situation in the east by cracking down on contraband and improving taxation in the borderlands, particularly for the lucrative *khat* trade along the hub of Aweday (in the ORS) to the export base Jigjiga (in the SRS).<sup>102</sup> Key to this was bolstering the Oromia *Liyu hail* on the basis of ensuring the safety of Hararghe *khat* farmers along the road from Harar to Jigjiga against arbitrary Somali *Liyu* incursions. The implicit accusations by the young ethno-populist ORS administration against their political adversaries—namely Abdi Iley and his ‘deep state’<sup>103</sup> TPLF backers in the security sector and in the Eastern Command headquartered in Harar—were unmistakable.<sup>104</sup>

The Jarso were also among the *khat* farmers in Hararghe that the ORS vowed to protect, while the Gerri began to lobby the Darood to reach out to Abdi Iley to protect their territorial (farmland) and trade interests (*khat*) vis-à-vis their Oromo-backed kin, the Jarso.<sup>105</sup> Abdi Iley, who increasingly appealed to pan-Somali sentiments both inside and outside Ethiopia at the

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100 Jeylan et al., ‘Politics of Protective Territoriality’.

101 Authors’ own observations during fieldwork between 2013 and 2018.

102 ‘Transacting in the Shade’, Ethiopian Business Review, 15 October 2018. Accessed 13 March 2024, <https://ethiopianbusinessreview.net/transacting-in-the-shade/>.

103 The public discourse of a TPLF deep state allegedly sabotaging the 2018 political transition is common: e.g. see: Mohammed Ademo (@OPride), X post, 27 March 2018. Accessed 17 March 2025, <https://x.com/OPride/status/978727082795634689>; or Befeqadu Z. Hailu (@befeqe), X post, 12 March 2021. Accessed 17 March 2025, <https://x.com/befeqe/status/1370273009559343105>.

104 Upon succeeding Abdi Iley as the president of the SRS in August 2018, Mustafe Omer also shared the view that the Oromia–Somali conflict was instigated as ‘part of the overall TPLF game of surviving by unleashing inter-ethnic conflicts [which] they felt ... would stop the reformists from coming to power’. See: ‘Policy Matters with Mustafa Omer’, Office of the Prime Minister, Special Series–Part 1 with Mustafe Omer, YouTube, 18 December 2020. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZI15CrB8KM>.

105 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.

time,<sup>106</sup> grew wary of the newly emerging Oromo elite rhetoric alluding to Somali invaders and the ORS intrusions in the Somali-dominated trade of the transregional and transnational *khat* business.<sup>107</sup> In response, Abdi Iley (himself from the Ogadeeni Darood clan) scaled up Tuli Guled to a woreda in Fafen zone in late 2016. Minority Jarso on the Somali side were, however, not given appointments, contributing to their sense of alienation. This resulted in a clash between the two clans, with the Gerri supported by Somali *Liyu* forces.<sup>108</sup>

Following this, in early 2017 and amidst the nationwide state of emergency, Somali *Liyu* forces undertook indiscriminate incursions in border kebeles in the Chinaksen, Babelle and Gursum woredas, leading the Oromia communication bureau to double down on the rhetoric that Somali militia were committing acts of ‘border expansion’ and ‘hoisting the [SRS] flag ... claiming the areas’.<sup>109</sup> Abdi Iley appeared to count on the tacit backing of TPLF security hardliners, who let the inter-regional *Liyu* clashes run their course in the hope that they might weaken the Oromo protests and OPDO politicians who threatened their ruling party power and privileges.<sup>110</sup> Accusations of TPLF and *Liyu* collusions were also aired by the Oromia communication bureau. As the entire Oromia–Somali regional border from Mieso to Moyale experienced border clashes from 2017 to 2019, both sides blamed each other for territorial invasions with belligerent claims and counterclaims that amounted to an ethnicized ‘interstate media war’.<sup>111</sup> Pitting Oromos against Somalis, this resulted in hundreds of deaths and more than a million internally displaced persons (IDPs).<sup>112</sup>

## ANIMOSITIES AFTER AWADAY

The peak of the borderland conflict was the Awaday massacre in September 2017, when ethnic Somalis were killed by Oromo rioters in this *khat* trading town. The massacre shocked Somalis in the SRS and beyond. It also resulted in everyday ‘border talk’ in Jigjiga about ‘Oromo expansionism’, including scenarios of a future ‘expansion of Oromia to Somaliland and

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106 Daniel Thompson and Namhla Matshanda, ‘Political Identity as Temporal Collapse: Ethiopian Federalism and Contested Ogaden Histories’, *African Affairs* 122/486 (2023).

107 Mustafe, ‘Fixing the Price’.

108 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.

109 ‘Despite nationwide state of emergency, several border incursions leave more than 100 dead in east and south east Ethiopia’, *Addis Standard*, 3 March 2017. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-despite-nationwide-state-emergency-several-border-incursions-leave-100-dead-east-south-east-ethiopia/>.

110 Hagmann and Mustafe, ‘Inter-ethnic violence’.

111 Amanuel Gebru, ‘Interstate Media Wars: The Experience of the Ethiopian Federation’, *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* 10/2 (2022).

112 OCHA, ‘Situation Report No 4’.

Djibouti’.<sup>113</sup> According to one pundit, ‘the roots of the Somali massacre’ were to be found in the 2004 referendum and Oromo expansionist ‘politics of mapmaking’: ‘The robbing of Somalis effectively brought [the] Oromo boundary close to Jigjiga. ... Oromia is dead serious to take over Tuli Guuleed, Haadow, Baabili, Bambaas and most of Faafan.’<sup>114</sup> From his perspective, this raised the Somali question in the Ethiopian federal context: ‘What binds Somalis to the federal constitution if their map has been slowly gutted since they signed the charter of unity in 1991?’<sup>115</sup> Oromo–Somali animosities after Awadaya accentuated this question among fellow Ethiopian Somalis.

After the Awadaya massacre, Abdi Iley banned the trade of Oromo products (notably *khat* from Hararghe) to the SRS to cut out Oromo traders and farmers, and thus protect the economic interests of Somalis in the SRS and beyond (some of those killed in Awadaya were of Somaliland origin).<sup>116</sup> The move violated federal law by setting up an inter-regional cross-border trade barrier and prompted Somali traders to circumnavigate established transport routes, sourcing their *khat* from closer to Jigjiga, near the Oromia–Somali border town of Bombas, instead of Awadaya.<sup>117</sup> Abdi Iley then seized upon the animosities around the Awadaya massacre to instigate the targeted expulsion of Oromos from Jigjiga, including Jarso who were seen or self-identified as Oromo. As one respondent present at the time recalls, ‘After the massacre, things escalated. All Jarso, including those considered ethnic Somali, were labelled Oromo and driven out [of Jigjiga city and Fafen zone].’<sup>118</sup>

Oromos who had been forced out of Jigjiga by Somali *Liyu* forces were escorted by the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) to IDP camps, including Hamaressa oil mill near Harar, where further clashes occurred.<sup>119</sup> The same respondent elaborates: ‘Getting kicked out from Jigjiga and Fafen united them. Oromo–Jarso and Somali–Jarso, who had been divided by the referendum, came together.’<sup>120</sup> Retaliation from the Oromo side did not take long. Between late 2017 and early 2018, scores of Somali Gerri were driven out of ORS–Jarso administered territories or attacked by *Liyu hail* in revenge incursions in Tuli Guled. The establishment of Qoloji IDP camp near Babilie resulted from tens of thousands ethnic Somalis fleeing East and West Hararghe

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113 Daniel K Thompson, ‘The Border as Temporal Horizon: A Borderlands Massacre and the Contested Futures of Federalism in Eastern Ethiopia’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* ns/oo (2024): 1–21.

114 Faisal Roble, ‘Roots to the Somali Massacre: Challenging False Narrative’, *Wardheer*, 27 September 2017. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://wardheernews.com/roots-to-the-somali-massacre-challenging-false-narrative/>.

115 Roble, ‘Roots’.

116 Mustafe, ‘Fixing the Price’.

117 Mustafe, ‘Regularly Irregular’.

118 Interview with scholar and expert on IDP camps, Jigjiga, 20 January 2024.

119 Dawit Endeshaw, ‘Clash in Harar’s Hamaressa IDPs camp leaves 4 dead’, *The Reporter*, 12 February 2018. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/3759/>.

120 Interview with scholar and expert on IDP camps, Jigjiga, 20 January 2024.

zones in early 2018,<sup>121</sup> although most Gerri who were persecuted sought refuge deeper inside SRS territories, in Jigjiga or Somaliland. Individual perpetrators of ethnic violence from each group (Gerri or Jarso) even left their homes and moved to the region (ORS or SRS) that granted them legal protection.<sup>122</sup> With nearly 1 million IDPs taken to 71 different refugee camps and arrival sites,<sup>123</sup> those who fled were given refuge in the region of their registered ethnicity.<sup>124</sup> This further hardened previously fluid identities.<sup>125</sup> Arguably, the 2017–2018 Oromia–Somali border conflict is the strongest strain in recent history on the already tenuous bond that held together the 200-year-old Jarso–Gerri clan alliance.

### PRECARIOUS PROSPECTS FOR PEACE, 2018–2022

By the end of 2017, the regional governments from both sides were ordered by the federal government to engage in peace talks and repatriate refugees. The Oromo–Somali regional clashes had also created a proxy war in the EPRDF coalition over central power.<sup>126</sup> After Abiy became prime minister in early 2018 and following his initial visits to the Somali region, it became apparent that Abdi Iley had misjudged the winds of change in Ethiopia.<sup>127</sup> Following yet more rounds of ethnic pogroms in Jigjiga and several border cities in early August 2018, the ENDF Eastern Command removed him from his position as SRS president.<sup>128</sup>

Under the newly installed SRS leadership, headed by Mustafe Omer, efforts were made together with the ORS regional president, Shimelis Abdisa, to ensure peace and reconciliation between Oromo–Somali communities. Their border peace initiatives were, however, less prominent than the parallel Asmara peace deal signed between the ONLF and the Ethiopian government.<sup>129</sup> In 2019, Oromo–Somali people-to-people peace conferences were held in Adama and Jigjiga,

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121 ‘Qoloji Spatial Profile’, UN-Habitat, June 2021. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://unhabitat.org/qoloji-spatial-profile>.

122 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024.

123 OCHA, ‘Situation Report No 4’.

124 At the time, Ethiopian identity cards registered the ethnicity of each citizen.

125 Interview with scholar and expert on IDP camps, Jigjiga, 20 January 2024.

126 René Lefort, ‘“Ethnic clashes” in Ethiopia: setting the record straight’, *Open Democracy*, 2 July 2024. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/ethnic-clashes-in-ethiopia-setting-record-straight/>.

127 Dawit Endeshaw, ‘PM on tour’, *The Reporter*, 14 April 2018. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/4925/>.

128 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Fast politics, slow justice: Ethiopia’s Somali region two years after Abdi Iley’, Conflict Research Programme, London: London School of Economics, 11 September 2020. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/Conflict-Research-Programme/crp-memos/Hagmann-Two-years-after-Iley-final.pdf>.

129 Aden Abdi, ‘One year on: moving from war to peace in Ethiopia’, Conciliation Resources, October 2019. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.c-r.org/news-and-insight/one-year-moving-war-peace-ethiopia>.

attended by both Shimelis Abdisa and Mustafe Omer.<sup>130</sup> In late 2019, the latter visited Tuli Guled to reconcile with the Jarso and enable their return to the SRS. Such efforts resulted in an inter-regional memorandum of understanding (MoU), signed under the auspices of the Ministry of Peace in 2021. The MoU pledges the continuation of inter-regional reconciliation, IDP repatriation and joint development projects for community integration (with an allocated budget of ETB 222 million [about USD 5.6 million]).<sup>131</sup> The federal stewards of the inter-regional MoU were familiar with the Oromia–Somali border context and conflict: The then minister of peace, Muferiat Kamil, is a graduate from Haramaya University in east Oromia, near Harar. Ahmed Shide, the minister of finance, was a Somali ruling party chairperson under Abdi Iley, and wrote his postgraduate thesis on the Oromia–Somali conflict in Mieso and Babille.<sup>132</sup> Ethiopian NGOs also held cross-boundary initiatives for peace at grassroots level among Jarso–Gerri communities, elders and officials on neutral ground in Dire Dawa.<sup>133</sup>

Restoring trust between the two communities, which share and use common customary conflict resolution institutions, through the top-down facilitation of regional elites did not last, however.<sup>134</sup> Peace initiatives gradually phased out. Respondents from the Jarso and Gerri note that customary conflict resolution mechanisms (*xeer*) practiced by Oromo and Somali borderland communities could play an important role in sustaining reconciliation and maintaining peace. In practice, clan elders—who in principle serve as ‘official counterparts’<sup>135</sup> to district and regional level authorities—have only played a marginal role in government facilitated peace processes. With various community members claiming that customary Jarso and Gerri peacemakers and *xeer* processes were sidelined or merely utilized for their symbolic

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130 ‘Somali-Oromo people-to-people conference commences in Adama’, *Fana Broadcasting Corporate*, 1 May 2019. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190503160424/https://fanabc.com/english/2019/05/somali-oromo-people-to-people-conference-commences-in-adama-city/>; ‘Somali-Oromo reconciliation conference kicks off in Jigjiga’, *Addis Standard*, 4 August 2019. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://x.com/addisstandard/status/1158373545606623232>.

131 ‘Oromia, Somali Regions Sign MoU to Cooperate in Peace, Dev’t’, *Ethiopian News Agency*, 25 January 2021. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en\\_20812](https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_20812). Exchange rate applies to January 2021, at ETB 1 to USD 0.02538.

132 Ahmed Shide, ‘Local Conflicts in Post Federal Ethiopia: Changing Nature, Responses and Impact: The Case Study of Ma’eso District’, MA Thesis, University of Sussex, Brighton, 2003.

133 ‘Cross-Boundary Initiative for Peace Annual Review workshop’, Ethiopian Institute of Peace, 14 August 2021. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://eipethiopia.org/?p=1343>.

134 By association of their clan name, Jarso elders are considered conflict mediators. Etymologically, the word ‘*jarso*’ is close to the Oromo word ‘*jarsa*’, meaning ‘elder’ and the word ‘*jarsumma*’, which means ‘elder council’.

135 Tobias Hagmann, ‘Bringing the Sultan Back In: Elders as Peacemakers in Ethiopia’s Somali Region’, in *State Recognition and Democratization in Sub-Saharan Africa: A New Dawn for Traditional Authorities?*, edited by Lars Buur and Helene Maria Kyed, 31–51. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007, 32.

value (co-opted) by the two regional governments.<sup>136</sup>

It is also unclear to what extent past local-level human rights violations in the Oromia-Somali borderlands that occurred during the 2017–2019 inter-regional border war and during subsequent clashes are to be subject of Ethiopia's ongoing National Dialogue (ND) and transitional justice (TJ) processes. The SRS has established a regional-level truth and reconciliation commission in 2021 in response to human rights abuses that were perpetrated by Liyu forces loyal to the regional administration of Abdi Iley.<sup>137</sup> Holding a regional TJ process was to complement the October 2018 Asmara peace accord, signed between the Ethiopian government and the ONLF following Abdi Iley's deposition.<sup>138</sup> The regional TJ process represented a rare opportunity for intra-regional and inter-regional reconciliation in the wake of the post-2018 political transition in SRS. After a promising start,<sup>139</sup> the window of opportunity for dealing with the past and ensuring accountability has closed fast, given the limited justice and reparations for victims of Liyu atrocities, including the Oromia-Somali borderlands.<sup>140</sup> President Mustafe Omer seeks to integrate the SRS regional level TJ processes with Ethiopia's nation wide TJ and ND processes, which commenced in response to the November 2022 Pretoria peace agreement that ended the 2020–2022 Tigray war. Members of the opposition in SRS argue that the national TJ and ND processes will water down specific demands for justice in Ogaden and the Oromia-Somali regional borderlands.<sup>141</sup> The ONLF for instance announced in October 2024 that it would suspend its participation in Ethiopia's ND process.<sup>142</sup>

Nevertheless, between 2019 and 2022 the eastern Oromia-Somali borderlands did see relative peace and stability. Qolaji IDP camp near Babilie grew into a permanent settlement, competition for cross-border khat trade resumed and both regions recruited underemployed youths to join the 2020–2022 war in Tigray and simultaneously bolster their regional police forces. Subdued

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136 Interview with Chinaksen cultural office worker, Chinaksen, 22 December 2023; phone interview with Jarso youth community leader, 26 December 2023; interview with Hawiya religious leader, Babilie, 1 January 2024; phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024.

137 Somali Regional State, 'Proclamation No. 205/2021: Establishment of the commission for Investigation of Violence and Reconciliation and Reparation of Victims in Somali Region', *Dhool Gazeta*, 19 July 2021. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.lawethiopia.com/images/regional%20laws/somali/ProclamationNo.205-2021%20Establishment%20of%20the%20commission%20for%20Investigation%20of%20Violence%20and%20Reconciliation%20and%20Reparation%20of%20Victims%20in%20somali%20region.pdf>.

138 FDRE and ONLF, 'Joint Declaration Between the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the Ogaden National Liberation Front', 21 October 2018, Asmara, Engl. translation, The University of Edinburgh, Peace Agreement Database. Accessed 10 May 2025, [https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2231\\_5do60a327543.pdf](https://www.peaceagreements.org/media/documents/ag2231_5do60a327543.pdf).

139 Abdi, 'One year on'.

140 Hagmann, 'Fast Politics, Slow Justice'.

141 Phone interview with NGO worker and TJ expert, Jigjiga, October 2024.

142 ONLF (@ONLFOfficial), X post, 21 October 2024. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://x.com/ONLFOfficial/status/1848127611618070929>.

tensions and the precariousness of peace only became apparent once again with brief clashes over the establishment of Mekanisa woreda and the construction of Merar dam between 2023 and 2024.

## ADMINISTRATIVE RESTORATION IN EASTERN OROMIA, 2019–2022

By 2017, ORS administrative control in eastern Oromia had dwindled, not only because the *qeerroo* protests expanded from the Oromia peripheries to the centre of the federation, but also because in Hararghe this intertwined with the escalation of the Oromia–Somali border conflict.<sup>143</sup> In the immediate wake of the border conflict, the *qeerroo* had dismantled or taken over entire kebele and woreda administrations across the regional state. In eastern Oromia, they ‘took over local administrations and ... played an instrumental role in securing law and order’.<sup>144</sup> Around Harar, vigilantes acted as parallel governments and temporarily held control over critical infrastructure with which they could leverage their demands against ORS administrations.<sup>145</sup>

Prior to the establishment of the PP in November 2019, the political space was relatively open and actors from the Oromo opposition, including the OLF and activists such as Jawar Mohammed, had returned from exile or campaigned across the region. The process of re-establishing regional state authority over local administrations was highly contested under the newly emerging political settlement. Jawar, for instance, provocatively says at the time that there were two governments in place, ‘Abiy’s government and the *qeerroo*’.<sup>146</sup> Abiy’s government addressed this challenge once he had dissolved the EPRDF. The Oromo wing of the PP, the OPP (Oromia Prosperity Party), then pushed to reassert administrative authority under Shimelis Abdisa.

From 2020 onwards, the political space for the Oromo opposition was once again quickly closing.<sup>147</sup> During the 2020 protests against the PP that followed the killing of the singer Hachalu Hundessa and the arrest of Jawar Mohammed and other opposition politicians, the

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143 ‘Popular Mobilisation in Ethiopia: An Investigation of Activity from November 2015 to May 2017’, ACLED Country Report, Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, August 2017. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/acled-country-report-popular-mobilisation-ethiopia-investigation-activity-november>.

144 Terje Østebo, ‘The role of the Qeerroo in future Oromo politics’, *Addis Standard*, 26 May 2020. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-the-role-of-the-qeerroo-in-future-oromo-politics/>.

145 William Davison and Leake Teweles, ‘Anguish for Harari as Oromo claim rights’, *Ethiopia Insight*, 2 January 2019. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2019/01/02/anguish-for-harari-as-oromo-claim-rights/>.

146 See: ፑቢሊሲስት (@IamFilmona), X post, 14 August 2018. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://x.com/IamFilmona/status/1029323992837050369>.

147 Despite this, the OLA had resumed armed struggle upon the return of the OLF from which it had split. See: Damena Abebe, ‘Conflict Trend Analysis: Western Oromia’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, March 2023.



PP government crackdown on the Oromo opposition became more concerted.<sup>148</sup> The forceful restoration of regional state hegemony and authority allowed the OPP to assert its ruling position in most parts of eastern Oromia, including the contested Oromia–Somali borderlands. This also enabled the OPP to refashion the institutions of local administrations in the image of the PP and Abiy’s mantra of *medemer* (lit. addition; coming together [Amharic]).<sup>149</sup> This contrasts with parts of southern and western Oromia, where the ENDF and Oromia regional forces faced militant opposition from the OLA and where civilian mistrust in both the government and opposition forces remained high.

Under Shimelis Abdisa’s OPP government, Hararghe received markedly more attention than under the OPDO, when it was politically peripheral despite its economic importance as a *khat* producing area and vibrant transregional and transnational trade corridor to the SRS and Somaliland.<sup>150</sup> This is reflected in noticeably outspoken addresses by Hararghe lawmakers at the Oromia legislative council (*Caffee*), calling for more attention to the zones while also acknowledging that ‘under previous governments our pleas always went unheard, but today there is improvement’.<sup>151</sup> Under Miski Mohammed’s leadership, East Hararghe zone in the Oromia–Somali borderlands saw a rise of public and private investments in infrastructure, irrigation and agricultural projects as well as transnational trade agreements with Somaliland. Miski is backed at regional and federal administrative levels by Chaltu Sani, also a former Hararghe zone deputy.<sup>152</sup> The latter hails from West Hararghe zone, where a large number of Somali citizens were displaced during the 2017 border conflict. Chaltu has been outspoken about alleviating displacement and dispossession through economic investments and job creation.<sup>153</sup> She went on to assume influential positions as the vice president of Oromia in 2019 and as federal minister of urbanization and infrastructure in 2021.<sup>154</sup> Reflecting the newfound importance of Hararghe, Miski received back-to-back awards for good governance in her zone.<sup>155</sup>

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148 Terje Østebø and Kjetil Tronvoll, ‘Interpreting contemporary Oromo politics in Ethiopia: an ethnographic approach’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 14/4 (2020).

149 The word ‘medemer’ encapsulates Abiy’s goal to forge Ethiopian state and society on the values of harmony and togetherness.

150 Mustafe, ‘Fixing the Price’.

151 Curate Oromia (@curateoromia), X post, 23 February 2024. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://x.com/curateoromia/status/1760820097617117471>.

152 OBN English, Facebook post, 25 December 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/OBNEnglish/videos/chaltu-sanis-visit/493420274617917/>.

153 Yonas Tesema, ‘Interrogating Dispossession for Development in Ethiopia’, *Forum for Development Studies* 49/1 (2022), 68–69.

154 ‘Chaltu Sani Ibrahim’, MultiFact Check. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://multifactcheck.org/data-stories/chaltu-sani-ibrahim/>.

155 The regional president, Shimelis Abdisa, gave her the award three years in a row, from 2022 to 2024. For example, see: Jemal Bile, Facebook posts, 26 July 2024. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=509287948322947&id=100077252376023&mibextid=xfxF2i&rdid=oQ436iFaZuCYfes2](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=509287948322947&id=100077252376023&mibextid=xfxF2i&rdid=oQ436iFaZuCYfes2); and [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=509094868342255&id=100077252376023&mibextid=xfxF2i&rdid=YRuoQ6a7nKoO1txt](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=509094868342255&id=100077252376023&mibextid=xfxF2i&rdid=YRuoQ6a7nKoO1txt).

Miski was also recognized by the region for ensuring that the OLA could not gain a foothold in the east the way it did in the west and south of Oromia. This is a symbolic achievement, given that the OLF was first founded in the Chercher mountains in Hararghe in 1974. She is on record for praising the role that the *qeerroo* played in the 2018 political transition and emphasized that her administration is working on bringing peace and development to the areas affected by the Oromia–Somali border conflict and displacement crisis.<sup>156</sup> Her administration integrated former *qeerroo* leaders into local office positions, while seeking to deter youths from joining the OLA.

One deterrence factor is that the Hararghe zones are at the forefront of forcibly recruiting youths as ‘guardians of the regime’ (*Gachana Sirna*) as a bulwark against the OLA.<sup>157</sup> Another is to fill the ranks of the Oromia regional forces (*Waajjira Milishaa Oromiaa*), formerly known as *Liyu hail*, with Oromo youths, numerous troops of which are stationed near checkpoints in the Oromia–Somali borderlands.<sup>158</sup> Across Oromia, coerced conscriptions and civilian subsidization of *Gachana Sirna* and the *Oromiaa Milishaa* are a burden on rural families,<sup>159</sup> whose youths are forced to ‘farm or fight’.<sup>160</sup> Respondents in Babilie town in Hararghe allege that underpaid ORS militia groups engage in vigilante extortions of small businesses and illegal land clearances for own-account farming.<sup>161</sup>

## ADMINISTRATIVE REMAPPING OF THE OROMIA BORDERLANDS, 2023–2024

For its borderlands, the ORS commissioned scientific studies to consider the possible rescaling, restructuring or merging of various administrative units (kebles, woredas and cities).<sup>162</sup> Congruent with the federal government’s plans to redesign the administrative mapping of

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156 Fana Broadcasting Corporate Afaan Oromoo, ‘Documentary on Dida Waled Valley’.

157 ‘Eastern Oromia residents agonize from fresh mass detention, forced conscription; zonal officials deny multiple accounts’, *Addis Standard*, 13 October 2022. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/analysis-eastern-ormia-residents-agonize-from-fresh-mass-detention-forced-conscription-zonal-officials-deny-multiple-accounts/>.

158 Author observations in Babilie town and along A10 highway to Bombas, January 2024.

159 ‘Residents of Oromia region report growing financial burden from mandatory contributions for militia’, *Addis Standard*, 9 November 2024. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/residents-of-ormia-region-report-growing-financial-burden-from-mandatory-contributions-for-militia-school-meal-programs/>.

160 ‘In-depth: Farm or Fight. Farmers in Oromia’s Horro Guduru Wollega zone struggle against forced conscription under Gachana Sirna’, *Addis Standard*, 6 September 2024. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/farm-or-fight-farmers-in-ormias-horro-guduru-wollega-zone-struggle-against-forced-conscription-under-gachana-sirna/>.

161 During a field visit to Babilie Elephant Sanctuary on 22 January 2024, the authors observed Oromia militia members who had cleared land in the Babilie Elephant Sanctuary for own-account farming.

162 Council of Oromia Regional Government, ‘3rd Ordinary Session of the 6th Fiscal Year of the 2nd Annual General Meeting’, Oromia Communication Bureau, 27 February 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/ormiabc/posts/pfbid0Nb6MfqVSQb7ZSFsqHgKvqE6GyBUfaY66XaFjfb7Q6mt9E653SepCxpDhbw1dPc961>.

the federation, the stated intention was to improve governance at the sub-regional level and mitigate cross-border ethnic conflicts, which were seen as a structural feature of the ethnic federalism implemented under the EPRDF government. By September 2024, this culminated in the ORS unveiling its woredas and village reforms, with the aim of creating a ‘village-level government’ in Oromia. The reforms pledged to enhance the efficiency of local administrative units and their service provisions.<sup>163</sup> Prior to this, the ORS had announced a string of concrete administrative changes that would come into effect over the year 2023.<sup>164</sup> These plans contained potentially controversial reforms to urban and rural administrative units across the region, including administrative reforms in the long contested Oromia–Somali borderlands.

In southern Oromia, this included the following. First, Moyale city, which is located on the Kenyan border and constitutes an administrative centre with woredas split between the Oromia and Somali regions, was scaled-up to regional city status. The Oromo part of the city came under direct regional state control as a regipolis. Second, a new East Borana zone was created by merging the formerly standalone Bale, East Guji and Borana zones,<sup>165</sup> with administrative centres (or seats) reassigned in the new zone<sup>166</sup> in a process called ‘clustering’.<sup>167</sup> Borana zone, which bordered the adjacent Liban zone in the Somali region, had also been subject to long-standing inter-ethnic conflicts between the Borana, Gabra and Garre groups,<sup>168</sup> not least since the 2004 border referendum<sup>169</sup> and the initial imposition of ethnic federalism in 1995.<sup>170</sup>

All of these changes are significant given that Moyale city and the Borana and Liban zones along the Oromia–Somali boundary, as well as the adjacent West Guji and Gedeo zones

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163 Oromia Regional State, ‘Riifoormii Aanaalee fi Gandoota Oromiaa’ (‘The Oromia Woreda and Village Reforms’), Addis Ababa: Oromia Regional State, September 2024. Archived by authors at: [https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/zygoD9o1ss5iswngqfzxj/240903\\_Oromia-Reforms\\_Gurmaa-insa\\_Aanaalee\\_fi\\_Gandootaa\\_MNO\\_final.pdf?rlkey=1039gbfew488qoi1yrrx3ryl4&st=kspd5ml3&dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fi/zygoD9o1ss5iswngqfzxj/240903_Oromia-Reforms_Gurmaa-insa_Aanaalee_fi_Gandootaa_MNO_final.pdf?rlkey=1039gbfew488qoi1yrrx3ryl4&st=kspd5ml3&dl=0).

164 ‘Oromia region announces restructuring of major cities, creation of new zonal and district administrative units’, *Addis Standard*, 28 February 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-ormia-region-announce-restructuring-of-major-cities-creation-of-new-zonal-and-district-administrative-units/>.

165 Kana Golicha, ‘How to resolve the Guji–Borana dispute over new zone’, *Curate Oromia*, 26 November 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://curateoromia.com/how-to-resolve-the-guji-borana-dispute-over-the-new-zone/>.

166 For example, Nagelle, the former capital of Guji zone, became the new capital of East Borana zone.

167 Asebe Regassa and Yacob Cheka, ‘New Cluster Regions and Distributive Struggles in Southern Ethiopia’, Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024.

168 Fekadu Adugna Tufa, ‘Politics of Territoriality in Ethiopia: The Case of the Pastoral Gabra of Southern Ethiopia’, *Ethiopian Journal of the Social Sciences and Humanities* 10/2 (2014); and Asebe Regassa, ‘Living with Conflict: Borana’s Resilience in Southern Ethiopia’, *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 9/2 (2019).

169 Bassi, ‘The Politics of Space’.

170 Schlee and Shongolo, ‘Local War’.

experienced inter-ethnic violence during the 2018 political transition.<sup>171</sup> The administrative changes announced and enforced in early 2023 by the ORS government are in line with federal government policy. While it is structurally constrained by the constitution, this policy implicitly favours a geographic or territorial model of federalism that prioritizes effective governance over ethnic representation. The ORS also framed parts of the recent reform as necessary to ‘eradicate lawlessness in the border areas [and] solve security problems along the border with the other regional states’.<sup>172</sup> Despite this, in the affected former Guji and Borana zones, the remapping immediately triggered tensions between ethnic groups, as well as protests against the lack of prior local level consultation, which stalled the establishment of East Borana zone.<sup>173</sup> On the Somali side, the SRS authorities and the Garre in the adjacent Liban zone remained relatively muted in their response to the Oromia-driven administrative reform process along the shared border.<sup>174</sup>

Two administrative changes in eastern Oromia along the Oromia–Somali border are also of relevance, the second of which related directly to the main case study in this report. First, Maya town was to be created by coridoring Haramaya, Adele and Awaday towns into 3 districts and 12 villages. This would incorporate the Awaday khat trading hub, which is where the massacre of Somali residents took place in 2017. Second, Chinaksen woreda was split into two separate woredas, including the former and the newly formed Mekanisa woreda, bordering the arable SRS Tuli Guled plains and Lafaysa town in Fafen zone, which is located in the foothills of the regional capital city, Jigjiga. Chinaksen has long been co-inhabited by the Jarso and Gerri clans but was increasingly contested between the two groups, when the Jarso voted for Chinaksen to join ORS in the 2004 referendum. Chinaksen has since been subject to recurrent intercommunal violence, particularly during the Oromia–Somali conflict (2017–2019).

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171 Gardner, ‘Shadow falls’; Gardner, ‘Uneasy peace’.

172 Council of Oromia Regional Government, ‘3rd Ordinary Session’.

173 ‘Stalemate in Guji zone, Southern Oromia as protests over govnerment’s decision to incorporate Negelle town into East Borana zone continue’, *Addis Standard*, 8 March 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://addisstandard.com/news-stalemate-in-guji-zone-southern-ormia-as-protests-over-governments-decision-to-incorporate-negelle-town-into-east-borana-zone-continue/>.

174 Interview with deputy security head of the SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

# CASE STUDIES: MERER DAM AND MEKANISA WOREDA

Relative stability between the Jarso and Gerri under the PP government was only briefly curtailed by resident and regional militia confrontations between the Oromia and Somali regions in 2023. These broke out in March over the construction of a micro-dam in Merer, an outpost kebele that is located in Fafen zone in the SRS but claimed and administered by the Oromia region. This coincided with the announcement of the splitting of Chinaksen and the creation of Mekanisa district, a move that was perceived by the Somali side as regional expansionism.<sup>175</sup>

Latent tensions in Chinaksen also became a talking point during fieldwork following the signing the MoU between Ethiopia and Somaliland at on 1 January 2024.<sup>176</sup> Jarso–Gerri tensions were prone to becoming embroiled in Abiy’s plans to gain direct access to the Red Sea.<sup>177</sup> Such tensions have since eased slightly with the announcement of the Ankara agreement signed between Ethiopia and Somalia in December 2024.<sup>178</sup> This may have temporarily directed attention away from Ethiopia’s central government seeking to create potential corridors across the Oromia–Somali borderlands to a naval port outlet on the Red Sea. Nevertheless, the Jarso and Geri borderland communities, their local clan leaders and political representatives have been able to adjust their strategic alliances in accordance with the fast shifting transnational relations between Ethiopia, Somaliland and Somalia.<sup>179</sup>

## MERER DAM CONSTRUCTION

Previous governments considered the Deda Waled to be a bread basket of eastern Ethiopia, valued for its agricultural potential for food crops, including sorghum and wheat, in addition to the lucrative cash crop, *khat*. Under the Derg, efforts to introduce small-scale irrigation included the construction of the Genda Mesno and Gela Gela micro-dams in what is now Chinaksen district. The old dams could not satisfy year-round water demand in the face of demographic

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175 ‘Fresh clashes near Oromia, Somali regions’, *Addis Standard*.

176 Biruk, ‘Ethiopia’s Red Sea Politics’.

177 Interview with independent Somali academic, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

178 Gisa Tunbridge, ‘Somaliland’s New President Sworn in amid Uncertainty over Ethiopia Port-Access Deal’, *The Africa Report*, 13 December 2024. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://www.theafricareport.com/371406/somalilands-new-president-sworn-in-amid-uncertainty-over-ethiopia-port-access-deal/>.

179 Multiple phone exchanges with independent Somali academic, Jigjiga, January–March 2025.

growth and droughts, so the ORS commissioned the construction of a micro-dam in Merer.<sup>180</sup> The modernization of rural irrigation is part of the PP government's national development strategy. At the inauguration of the eastward Adama–Awash highway,<sup>181</sup> Abiy asserted that his government plans ‘to build over 100 small and medium dams in various regions ... to produce agricultural products three times per year and thereby ensure food security’.<sup>182</sup> Irrigation is an essential component of the nation-wide expansion of wheat cluster farming,<sup>183</sup> which aims to make Ethiopia self-sufficient in wheat production as part of Abiy's Green Legacy Initiative.<sup>184</sup>

Locally, this translates into the development of micro-dams in marginalized areas such as Merer. The Deda Waled has been designated as a key production site, where the ORS and the SRS have integrated many smallholders into wheat clusters in Chinaksen<sup>185</sup> and Tuli Guled, respectively. The Tuli Guled wheat fields were jointly visited by Abiy and Mustafe Omer in August 2022<sup>186</sup> and October 2022,<sup>187</sup> just a few months before the conflict over the Merer dam erupted. Pro-Jarso social media commentators were unsettled that Abiy failed to mention their plight during past border conflicts when he visited Gerri-dominated Tuli Guled farmlands.<sup>188</sup> Members from the Jarso and Gerri clans, each perceiving themselves as more marginalized and victimized than the other, compete to have their voices heard at higher levels of government. In escalated form, this can include orchestrating clashes or acts of destruction.

180 Interview with Chinaksen civil servant, Chinaksen, 22 December 2023.

181 In the future, this is set to be extended further east via Mieso to Dire Dawa. For more information, see: Ethiopian Roads Authority, ‘Awash–Meisso–Dire Dawa Expressway Road Project (P174485) Security Management Plan’, Addis Ababa: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, March 2023. Accessed 28 February 2025, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099033023140514302/pdf/P1744850115b990810a3c00816c8280ee2b.pdf>.

182 ‘Ethiopia Set to Build over 100 Small, Medium Dams: PM Abiy’, *Ethiopian News Agency*, 30 May 2021. Accessed 28 February 2025, [https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en\\_24901](https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_24901).

183 ‘Abiy Ahmed's agricultural revolution is too good to be true’, *The Economist*, 13 March 2025. Accessed 16 March 2025, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2025/03/13/abiy-ahmeds-agricultural-revolution-is-too-good-to-be-true>; and Samuel Bogale, ‘Wheat self-sufficiency: agricultural revolution or political assertion?’, *The Reporter*, 15 October 2022. Accessed 28 February 2025, <https://www.thereporterethiopia.com/27139/>.

184 ‘Nation Intensifying Green Legacy Initiative to Boost Agricultural Yields’, *Ethiopian News Agency*, 29 May 2021. Accessed 28 February 2025, [https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en\\_24883](https://www.ena.et/web/eng/w/en_24883).

185 Biiroo Qonnaa Oromiyaa (Oromia Bureau of Agriculture), Facebook post, 21 February 2022. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=281473570762158&id=10006698501042&set=a.256770659899116&locale=de\\_DE](https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=281473570762158&id=10006698501042&set=a.256770659899116&locale=de_DE).

186 Dr Hussein Kasim (@husseinkasim), X post, 14 August 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, <https://x.com/Husseinkasim/status/1558870448284520448>.

187 Abdinasir Magool (@Abdinasir\_Abdul), X post, 9 October 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://x.com/Abdinasir\\_Abdul/status/1579026723450269698](https://x.com/Abdinasir_Abdul/status/1579026723450269698).

188 Jarsoo Group, Facebook post, 9 October 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbidocVafYS4\\_qa5xfXm9NedXWLCP8gp33gJATfapDmGtb2AD4JGx28bY3VhkeJNUfhkil&id=100076190794027](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbidocVafYS4_qa5xfXm9NedXWLCP8gp33gJATfapDmGtb2AD4JGx28bY3VhkeJNUfhkil&id=100076190794027).

In January 2023, clan militias clashed in borderland kebeles of Chinaksen and Tuli Guled, including in Merer kebele.<sup>189</sup> The number of casualties is disputed, ranging between 7 and 20, according to different sources.<sup>190</sup> Fighting was sparked by an ORS announcement about the beginning of construction for the micro-dam in Merer, a kebele suddenly subject to fierce contestation.<sup>191</sup> ORS considers Merer a kebele that is located at the outer bounds of Chinaksen district, less than 5 km from Chinaksen town. Against this, SRS officials and the Gerri claim Merer as part of Tuli Guled woreda.<sup>192</sup> Both sides see the unclear results of the 2004 referendum as still enabling such overlapping claims and upticks in violence as soon as distributive questions (about investment and development projects) and associated negotiations over resource access in borderlands are at stake. The lack of comprehensive border demarcation in the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands clearly leaves room for claim making. The welcome influx of state-facilitated investments to this previously socio-economically marginalized kebele is, however, what sparked the sudden conflict over distributive interests (who gets what) among competing local Jarso and Gerri political and economic entrepreneurs. Struggles over Jarso identity and belonging are strategically used to assert ownership. Merer is a Jarso-dominated kebele but the Gerri and Jarsos who identify as Somali maintain that the Jarso are of Somali origin and, by extension, so is the territory they inhabit.

SRS leadership was put in an awkward position when the former police commissioner, Cali Samire, in his function as head of the border affairs and conflict resolution bureau for the SRS, publicly accused the ORS of territorial expansionism in Merer.<sup>193</sup> He was dismissed by his superiors, with the SRS communication bureau stating that he had exceeded his responsibilities with his public outburst, which did not represent the SRS government position.<sup>194</sup> Asked about this dismissal, a SRS security official emphasized the need for de-escalation. Critical of ‘Oromo map-making’, he added however that the SRS administration was concerned about the promotion of what he calls ‘official false maps’, which present areas such as Tuli Guled and Lafaysa as part of the ORS and give Oromo activists cause to make land claims.<sup>195</sup> This, he says, results in mistrust among Somalis in the SRS.<sup>196</sup> Varying official administrative maps of the ORS

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189 ACLED, ‘EPO Weekly: 14–20 January 2023, Situation Report’, *ReliefWeb*, 25 January 2023. Accessed 28 February 2025, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-epo-weekly-14-20-january-2023>.

190 ‘Fresh clashes near Oromia, Somali regions’, *Addis Standard*; ACLED, ‘EPO Weekly: 14–20 January 2023’.

191 ‘Civilians killed in clashes’, *Addis Standard*.

192 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jiggiga, 21 January 2024; phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024. The remainder of the paragraph is based on the authors’ observations during fieldwork, November 2023 to January 2024.

193 Karamara TV, Facebook post, 17 January 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/KaramaraTV/videos/5858147384267724/>.

194 Somali Regional State Communication Bureau, Facebook post, 17 January 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0Kg87HKHxQB9pSouoKWFsb92d8dSdt3kadUt4LN8vyhZxVmbT3QvVoQSCAdCoUZml&id=100068776418746](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0Kg87HKHxQB9pSouoKWFsb92d8dSdt3kadUt4LN8vyhZxVmbT3QvVoQSCAdCoUZml&id=100068776418746).

195 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jiggiga, 21 January 2024.

196 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jiggiga, 21 January 2024.

and the SRS in circulation are also cause for confusion among NGOs working in the borderlands, who wonder which kebeles are under what administration.<sup>197</sup> The Oromo Jarso community in Chinaksen considers the land on which Merer dam was built as part of ORS according to the 2004 referendum, and not least given its proximity to the administrative centre of Chinaksen town. Likewise, they tend to see the presence of Somali *Liyu* police near Merer as an aggression signalling potential territorial expansionism by SRS elites who support the Gerri.<sup>198</sup>

Opposition political organizations in the SRS such as the Congress for Somali Cause claim that Merer dam would dry out the Jarar river and affect downstream zones in SRS and possibly ‘displace 35,000 Somali farmers in wheat-rich rolling prairie land’.<sup>199</sup> In response, Jarso officials and elders, as well as Somali academics and SRS officials, downplayed the risks.<sup>200</sup> Interestingly, an environmental and social impact study for Merer dam was commissioned by the ORS in advance of construction. It warns that a possible impediment to the project ‘found near the Oromia–Somali regional boundary’ is ‘conflict between the two ethnic groups’.<sup>201</sup> According to the study, this issue was ‘repeatedly raised between the two ethnic groups in the area’ during stakeholder consultations. The study also cautions that the conflict would need to be addressed ahead of construction: ‘security of the area needs great attention [and] cooperation of the Regional States, including the federal government. Otherwise the implementation of the project will trigger conflicts.’ During the consultation process, local communities demanded access to a water reservoir area and pump for common use next to the proposed irrigation for the government wheat clusters. The study adds that conflicts could be offset if demands for community access were met.

Given the January 2023 Merer clashes, the two regions reportedly agreed to pause the dam construction and reassess its social impacts.<sup>202</sup> Local officials in Chinaksen suggested that the federal government had likely intervened to halt the construction.<sup>203</sup> In mid-April 2023, the dispute was also discussed between Mustafe Omer and Shimelis Abdisa. One initial

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197 Interview with NGO worker, UNICEF, Jigjiga, 27 December 2023.

198 Interview with farmer from Chinaksen, Chinaksen town, 23 December 2023; Interview with former Chinaksen communication director, Kersa, 15 December 2023.

199 Congress for Somali Cause, Facebook post, 10 March 2023. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/SomaliCause/photos/for-immediate-releasestop-romia-land-grab-congress-for-somali-cause-denounces-0/212909644588267/?\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/SomaliCause/photos/for-immediate-releasestop-romia-land-grab-congress-for-somali-cause-denounces-0/212909644588267/?_rdr).

200 Interview with independent Somali academic, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024; Interview with former Chinaksen kebele administrator and community leader, Jigjiga, 20 January 2024; Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024; Phone interview with Somali-Jarso elder, 23 January 2024.

201 Oromia Bureau of Agriculture and Natural Resources Irrigation Development Branch, ‘Merar Micro Dam Small Scale Irrigation Development Project: Environmental and Social Impact Assessment’, Addis Ababa: Oromia Regional State, April 2021, 46–48. The information in the remainder of this paragraph is derived from this source.

202 ‘Fresh clashes near Oromia, Somali regions’, *Addis Standard*.

203 Interview with Chinaksen woreda civil servant, Chinaksen, December 2023.



compromise proposed was the construction of a second dam on the Tuli Guled side. The Gerri allegedly rejected this, pointing out that Merer was part of the SRS to begin with, so accepting the construction of a second dam by the ORS essentially implied ceding territory to Oromia. According to one study respondent, the Gerri and Jarso living in the vicinity started customary negotiations but these broke down when it became clear that the ORS would resume construction in late 2023.<sup>204</sup>

Countering the narrative that Merer is a contested borderland kebele, one state parliamentarian notes, ‘Merer kebele is located in the heart of Chinaksen, far away from the border of the Somali regional government. The construction of the irrigation project was halted due to a dispute. When will this be solved?’<sup>205</sup> When it became clear that the ORS would resume construction of Merer micro-dam in late 2023, members of the Gerri community tried to block this, which is when more unreported clashes allegedly occurred, followed by unconfirmed forays by Oromo forces into Tuli Guled.<sup>206</sup> A Jarso elder based in Jigjiga says that Merer dam was built over the course of 2024 in relatively peaceful conditions, given the restraint of the SRS and the determination of the ORS.<sup>207</sup> In mid-November 2024, officials from the Ministry of Irrigation and Lowlands announced that Merer dam had been completed and would be ready to be inaugurated.<sup>208</sup> The operationalization of the dam was confirmed by a Jigjiga based Jarso elder in March 2025, who claims that the situation between the Jarso and Gerri in the vicinities of the dam is ‘peaceful and stable’ since the turn of the year 2024–2025.<sup>209</sup>

To date, the discourse around Merer is one of territorial expansionism on both sides. In particular, this view is promulgated by Ethiopian diaspora Somalis on forums such as Somalispot.<sup>210</sup> Somali

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204 Interview with Chinaksen worda civil servant, Chinaksen, December 2023.

205 *Ogaal Media*, ‘Golaha baarlamaanka Oromiya ee Qaabsomay July 20/2022 Ayuud Xildhibaanli So jeediyay in Zoon Makaniisa lagaaa dhigo Degmo’ (‘Oromia Parliamentary Assembly convened on 20 July 2022, MP suggested that Makaniisa Zone be made a district’), Facebook post, 28 February 2023. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/OgaalMediapp/videos/1406202370171181/?idorvanity=418134932175613&ref=embed\\_video&t=28](https://www.facebook.com/OgaalMediapp/videos/1406202370171181/?idorvanity=418134932175613&ref=embed_video&t=28).

206 Jarso and Gerri study participants as well as government officials provided conflicting information about the scale of this second round of clashes around Merer dam and the alleged subsequent incursion of Oromo forces into Tuli Guled: Interview with Chinaksen civil servant, Chinaksen, 22 December 2023; Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024; Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024; Interview with member of the peace and foreign relations committee, Addis Ababa, 18 January 2024.

207 Phone interview with Somali-Jarso elder, 23 January 2024.

208 Abdurahman Abdella, Facebook post, 15 November 2024. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://web.facebook.com/abdurahman.abdella.14/posts/27456425460668557.\\_rdc=1&\\_rdr](https://web.facebook.com/abdurahman.abdella.14/posts/27456425460668557._rdc=1&_rdr).

209 Several phone exchanges with Somali-Jarso elder, March 2025.

210 On Merer, see: Arkan, ‘Ethiopia: Oromia and Somali Region’, *Somalispot*, 1 March 2023, 5. Accessed 28 February 2025, <https://www.somalispot.com/threads/ethiopia-romia-and-somali-region.143702/page-5>. On Mekanisa, see: Arkan, ‘Ethiopia: Oromia and Somali Region’, *Somalispot*, 28 February 2023, 1. Accessed 28 February 2025, <https://www.somalispot.com/threads/ethiopia-romia-and-somali-region.143702/>.

activists and Somalia-based media continue to call for attention to attacks on Gerri farmlands and water sources in Merer by Jarso clan militias referred to as ‘*Fadogna*’ or ‘*Fatno*’.<sup>211</sup> According to a study participant, Oromia government backed ‘Jarso militias [who] have amassed heavy weaponry and vehicles since the end of the Oromia–Somali regional border war in 2018’.<sup>212</sup> He adds that the Gerris can hardly compete with these militias, raising fears that the Tuli Guled territories in the SRS are also prone to a possible takeover by the ORS in future. He also notes that militia build up and backing by regional states post-2018 is the main wedge that keeps the Jarso and Gerri divided. This is countered by Chinaksen community members and leaders who say the possible deployment of *Liyu* forces from Jigjiga near Merer poses an expansionist threat and evokes memories of displacement from the 2017–2019 inter-regional war,<sup>213</sup> despite SRS security officials emphasizing the need for both sides’ security forces to show restraint.<sup>214</sup>

In the wake of the Merer dam controversy, accusations of Oromo expansionism remain present among study respondents due to the ostensive restraint shown by the Mustafe Omer administration and the *Liyu*, which is mainly made up of Ogadeeni fighters. Such fears are also strongly expressed by Somalia-based media, which allegedly airs the grievances of displaced Gerri civilians: ‘Yesterday they took Jinacsani. Today, it is Marar, and tomorrow it is Tuli Guled ... We can’t have two unequal governments—one that is swallowing our land piecemeal ... and one that does nothing at all’.<sup>215</sup>

Accounts of displacement in the area are sensitive and can evoke strong emotions. Associated distributive conflicts over water and land resources in the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands can destabilize the relative peace if they become ensnared in transregional tensions between Ethiopia and Somalia over the former seeking access to the coast in Somaliland. With the blurred Oromo–Somali ethnic and Jarso–Gerri clan boundaries, and Tuli Guled being less than 25 km from Jigjiga, the conflict over the Merer dam is uncomfortably close to the SRS centre of power.

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211 *Fadogna* is a critical reference to a battle when Shewan (central Ethiopian) forces under Ras Mekonnen annexed Oromo and Somali territories in Hararghe in the late 1880s; *Fatno* is a shortform for ‘*fatno darash*’ [Amharic], meaning rapid response forces. During the Derg *fatno darash* were deployed to suppress uprisings or coups. The term is critically used by Somalis to denote the presence of Ethiopian forces in Somali territories.

212 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024. The remaining information in this paragraph is derived from this source.

213 Interview with Chinaksen civil servant, Chinaksen town, 22 December 2023.

214 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

215 Daljir Media (@radiodaljir), X post, 26 August 2024. Accessed 25 February 2025, <https://x.com/radiodaljir/status/1828135850015604890>.

## MEKANISA WOREDA CREATION

Among the regional administrative reforms announced by the ORS in February 2023, one month after the clashes over Merer, was that Mekanisa kebele was to be separated from Chinaksen woreda to become a woreda itself.<sup>216</sup> Oromo Jarso community members living in Mekanisa, who had voted to become part of ORS in 2004, have since then been under the administration of Chinaksen woreda but found themselves not only stranded in an island kebele surrounded by kebeles that had voted to join SRS but allegedly also subject to frequent *Liyu* police interferences and clashes in and around Mekanisa, thus fearing an eventual annexation of Mekanisa into SRS.<sup>217</sup> This created difficulties for accessing administrative services, conducting business and maintaining social relations to the territorially separate Chinaksen administrative centre. The idea of elevating Mekanisa's administration to a woreda within its geographic boundary was to decouple it administratively from Chinaksen woreda and improve service provisions to Mekanisa residents.<sup>218</sup>

Gerri communities in the SRS saw this as yet another unilateral move by the ORS: They perceived it as the administrative upgrading of what had previously been 'little more than a few villages', in the eyes of regional officials.<sup>219</sup> Critics went further. They claimed that Mekanisa was part of SRS territory and its inhabitants, as with those in Merer, were of Somali origin, likening ORS actions to territorial annexation.<sup>220</sup> ORS officials, including Miski Mohammed, head of East Hararghe zone, countered that Mekanisa was among the borderland kebeles that had voted to join the ORS in 2004.<sup>221</sup>

In a 2022 documentary aired on national television ahead of the administrative change, Miski explains that Chinaksen had the largest landmass of all the woredas in East Hararghe zone and had to be reduced in size to ensure equal administrative services to marginalized areas such as Mekanisa, which she maintains 'belongs to but is disconnected from Oromia'.<sup>222</sup> Echoing this narrative, local civil servants say that the creation of Mekanisa woreda, which has 15 kebeles comprising around 16,500 households, would improve the provision of government services in

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216 Council of Oromia Regional Government, '3rd Ordinary Session'.

217 Interviews with Babille revenue office worker, Babille, 1 December 2023 and 22 January 2024.

218 Interview with Mekanisa woreda administrator, Mekanisa, 23 December 2023.

219 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

220 Congress for Somali Cause, Facebook post, 10 March 2023. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://www.facebook.com/SomaliCause/photos/for-immediate-releasestop-ormia-land-grab-congress-for-somali-cause-denounces-o/212909644588267/?\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/SomaliCause/photos/for-immediate-releasestop-ormia-land-grab-congress-for-somali-cause-denounces-o/212909644588267/?_rdr).

221 In the words of Miski: 'That land is located in Chinaksen woreda of Oromia region. It is our land according to the referendum.' Aaqil Usmaan, 'Caffee Oromia Council Members: East Hararghe Chinaksen Background', *YouTube*, translated by authors, 15 July 2022. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_tbfy26HwTM&ab\\_channel=AaqilUsmaan-ChafeOromiaCouncilmembers](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tbfy26HwTM&ab_channel=AaqilUsmaan-ChafeOromiaCouncilmembers).

222 Fana Broadcasting Corporate Afaan Oromoo, 'Documentary on Dida Waled Valley'.

the patchwork borderlands.<sup>223</sup> Miski emphasizes that the Oromo-Jarso communities in Mekanisa had faced hardship during the Oromia-Somali conflict.<sup>224</sup> She indicates that they had been cut off from Oromia by the surrounding SRS-administered kebele, partly because clan-based militias located around Chinaksen and Mekanisa obstructed the transport of people and goods.<sup>225</sup> As we observed during fieldwork, a 130 km detour via Jigjiga, Tog Wajaale and Lafaysa is required to travel between both places. Miski also promises to resolve the underlying security issues in dialogue with her SRS counterparts in Fafen zone to establish Mekanisa woreda peacefully.<sup>226</sup>

The new administrator of the recently formed Mekanisa woreda insists that its establishment was not a top-down move by the ORS but one that had emerged in response to local community demands.<sup>227</sup> In July 2022, speaking at the Oromia state council (*Caffee Oromia*), an MP from East Hararghe zone raises what he calls ‘a request by the community’ for Mekanisa to become a woreda.<sup>228</sup> Following controversy over the reform, a month later, the newly established Mekanisa communication bureau states that it would hold a public opinion poll on the creation of Mekanisa woreda to seek community feedback for future development of the woreda.<sup>229</sup> Although poll results were not made public, the Mekanisa communication bureau was quick to announce that its constituents are indeed in agreement with the establishment of the new woreda.<sup>230</sup>

## COUNTERPOINTS AND COUNTERCURRENTS

Somali critics and the Gerri community in particular voice their own concrete complaints about the creation of Mekanisa woreda. They counter that by claiming and creating Mekanisa woreda, ORS territory now cuts off the SRS Tuli Guled and Awbare woredas from Jigjiga. On

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223 Interview with civil servant, Chinaksen woreda, 22 December 2023.

224 *Fana Broadcasting Corporate Afaan Oromoo*, ‘Documentary on Dida Waled Valley’.

225 Aaqil Usmaan, ‘*Caffee Oromia* Council Members’.

226 *Fana Broadcasting Corporate Afaan Oromoo*, ‘Documentary on Dida Waled Valley’. Since 2018, ‘24,000 Jarso Oromo IDPs ... hosted in Chinaksen woreda [have been] unable to return to their original place in Tuli Guled due to unresolved security issues’. Source: OCHA Ethiopia, ‘Ethiopia: Humanitarian Access Situation Report, January–March 2020’, Addis Ababa: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, March 2020, 3. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/ethiopia/ethiopia-humanitarian-access-situation-report-january-march-2020>.

227 Interview with Mekanisa woreda administrator, Mekanisa, 23 December 2023.

228 *Ogaal Media*, Facebook post.

229 Mekanisa District Communication Bureau, ‘Hundeeffamuu Aanaa Makkannisa Oromoo irra attii Yaada Ummata Sassaabame’ (‘Public opinion collected on the establishment of Mekanisa district’), Mekanisa: Oromia Regional State, 4 March 2023. Accessed 13 March 2025, <https://share.evernote.com/note/1cbo6780-3feb-888b-4a7d-ade623f5c52b>.

230 Jemal Bile, Facebook post, 5 March 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, [https://web.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=218200280765050&id=100077252376023&rdid=lkHn002beYFMaJba](https://web.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=218200280765050&id=100077252376023&rdid=lkHn002beYFMaJba). Considering the Jarso-majority versus Gerri-minority demographic in Mekanisa, it is likely that this result reflects the majority view and accepts the recent administrative change.

the one hand, this is seen as disrupting mobility and livelihoods. The Gerri, including many IDPs, say they cannot travel freely between Awbare and Jigjiga but instead must pass through Oromia-controlled areas (checkpoints) before moving via Lafaysa to Jigjiga.<sup>231</sup> Others, such as the neighbouring Gababuursi, who inhabit Lafaysa and take a more neutral stance on the Gerri–Jarso feuds, have not voiced any serious objections to the Oromia administrative change in Mekanisa, despite also having a minority presence in the newly formed worda.<sup>232</sup>

On the other hand, the ORS move can be interpreted as part of a wider geopolitical ploy. Mekanisa purportedly represents a gateway for the Ethiopian government to a potential Red Sea port in Zayla in the Gadabuursi-inhabited Awdal state in Somaliland. In the context of the Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU, the comparatively minor move of upgrading Mekanisa (‘a few villages’) to a worda or investment projects such as the micro-dam in Merer and road construction in Chinaksen risk being perceived as the ORS laying the foundations for a much larger project. That is, these are foundations for reviving the imperial Zayla trade corridor to connect Addis Ababa, via Gadabuursi territories in the SRS (Lafaysa and Awbare), to the Somaliland border town of Borama. While Ethiopia mainly has plans to upgrade its trade corridors to Djibouti and Berbera,<sup>233</sup> in 2022 Somaliland conducted a feasibility study for the construction of the Borama–Lowyaddo road project funded by the African Development Bank. The study suggests that the road will improve trade from Borama to Zeyla and ‘serve as a strategic link’ between Ethiopia and Somaliland.<sup>234</sup>

Somali critics fear that after creating the Mekanisa worda, the ORS might also attempt to annex Tuli Guled and pave a corridor through Gadabuursi-inhabited areas in Ethiopia to Borama town and Awdal state.<sup>235</sup> For example, the MoU signed in January 2024 between Ethiopia and Somaliland for port access for the former in return for statehood recognition of the latter has been met with mixed approval by rivalling Gadabuursi groups who claim ancestral ownership

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231 Phone interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024; interview with NGO worker, UNICEF, Jigjiga, 27 December 2023.

232 Interview with Gadabuursi trader and community leader, Harar, 23 January 2024.

233 See: ‘Addis-Djibouti Corridor to Get Major Upgrade That is Key to Unlocking Connectivity and Trade for Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa’, press release no: 2023/091/AFE, 20 July 2023, World Bank Group. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2023/07/20/addis-djibouti-corridor-to-get-major-upgrade-that-is-key-to-unlocking-connectivity-and-trade-for-ethiopia-afe-hoa>.

234 ‘Upgrading of Lowyaddo-Farddaha-Borama road Project (256km)’, African Development Bank, 9 August 2022. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.afdb.org/en/documents/somalia-upgrading-lowyaddo-farddaha-borama-road-project-256km-p-z1-dbo-251>.

235 Interview with independent academic, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024; interview with Gadabuursi trader and community leader, Harar, 23 January 2024.

over the coastal territory of Zayla.<sup>236</sup> Cognizant of their position as a cross-border clan inhabiting areas in both Ethiopia and Somaliland, and, in the past, having constructed their political and economic opportunities by reacting flexibly to shifting inter and intra-state border regimes between Ethiopia, Somaliland and Somalia,<sup>237</sup> the Gadabuursi could consider embracing the revival of Zayla.<sup>238</sup> In contrast, the SRS leadership in Jigjiga views such support with suspicion but has so far respected federal government matters in relation to the MoU.<sup>239</sup>

Respondents point out that instead of relating the creation of Mekanisa to a potential Jarso-Gadabuursi alliance, others fear that a corridor could alternatively also enhance Jarso-Isaaq relations. There are historical and genalogical reasons for such assumptions.<sup>240</sup> In the late 1980s, the Jarso were allied with the largely Isaaq composed Somali National Movement (SNM) against Somalia's Darood dominated Siad Barre government. The Darood instead supported the Gerri in opposition to Jarso dominance in the northern Jigjiga zone. Where the Jarso and Isaaq are considered as related to the Dir clan, the Ogadeeni (Darood sub-clan) in SRS may perceive the formation of a contemporary Jarso-Isaaq alliance as a revival of the ancient Dir dominance in eastern Hararghe which existed in the early 1500s.<sup>241</sup> The respondents assert that Darood elites who ideologically sympathize with Greater Somalia irredentism do not necessarily want Ethiopia to gain access to the Red Sea via the Gadabuursi or Isaaq territories. Instead, the Ogadeeni would prefer if Ethiopia were to consider expanding investments in and use of the Darood controlled Garacad seaport on the Indian Ocean, in Puntland, north-eastern Somalia. This would instead consolidate Darood relations between Ethiopia and Somalia.

## FRESH FIGHTING MET WITH CLOSE COOPERATION

In mid-March 2023, fresh clashes broke out over Mekanisa for a week in several villages,

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<sup>236</sup> For example, the Awdal State Movement hesitantly welcomed the MoU (but later reneged on their public endorsement given mixed opinions about the MoU in Somaliland). Support for the MoU is by no means unanimous among the Gadabuursi (and Ciise), with protests in several towns and hostility by armed groups in Awdal.

<sup>237</sup> Dereje Feyissa and Markus Hoehne, 'Resourcing State Border and Borderlands in the Horn of Africa', Working Paper No. 107, Hale/Saale: Max Plack Institute for Social Anthropology, 2008, 11.

<sup>238</sup> Adwal Institute, 'Embracing Zeila's Revival: The Reawakening of the Awdal Gem', *Somaliland Current*, 14 December 2023. Accessed 26 February 2025, <https://www.somalilandcurrent.com/embracing-zeilas-revival-the-reawakening-of-the-awdal-gem/>.

<sup>239</sup> The status of the MoU, signed between Ethiopia and Somaliland on 1 January 2024, has lost in significance given the signing of the Ankara agreement between Ethiopia and Somalia nearly a year later, on 12 December 2024. The latter attests to Ethiopia's respect for Somalia's territorial sovereignty, which implicitly includes Somaliland.

<sup>240</sup> Phone exchanges with independent academic, January–March 2025; interview with Gadabuursi trader and community leader, Harar, 23 January 2024. The remainder of the paragraph is informed by these exchanges.

<sup>241</sup> Guido Ambroso, 'Clanship, Conflict and Refugees: An Introduction to Somalis in the Horn of Africa', unpublished report, 2002. Accessed 25 February 2025, <http://hdl.handle.net/2307/4150>.

including between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled, reportedly killing and injuring dozens.<sup>242</sup> Militias also targeted civilian infrastructure, livestock and farmland. Local accounts of what exactly occurred are contradictory. While the Oromia communication bureau dismissed allegations that the ORS had annexed territory or that its regional forces were involved in clashes, media outlets sympathetic to the OLF and OLA instead framed the clashes around Chinaksen as the result of ‘border expansion of the Somali regional state’.<sup>243</sup> Oromo Jarso activists also posted political cartoons depicting President Mustafe Omer as an aggressor, using Gerri clan militias to intensify the Jarso–Gerri conflict in Chinaksen.<sup>244</sup>

The ORS security presence around Chinaksen has been recurrently bolstered since the 2017–2018 border war, the 2004 border referendum and even prior to that—always with the stated intention of protecting the area from bandits (*shifta*) and OLF and ONLF activities in the Karamara foothills.<sup>245</sup> Somali *Liyyu* also remained stationed near Tuli Guled but not as extensively. Activists from both sides of the conflict accuse the other regional administration of tolerating clan militias, which have yet to undergo comprehensive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes. Study respondents who work with affected IDPs note that the conflict was also prolonged because diaspora individuals originally from the area have continued to fund the Gerri fighters, given that the Jarso militia is backed by Oromia regional forces. They also put pressure on the SRS administration to maintain control over the land between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled, considering its investment potential; for example, livestock rearing and wheat farming.<sup>246</sup>

Accused of being the aggressors, SRS officials stated that Somali *Liyyu* have not been involved and that they had called for restraint among local militants.<sup>247</sup> Aware of the risk for escalation, they pledged to resolve the flare up in dialogue with their ORS counterparts.<sup>248</sup> As one study respondent explains, ‘*Liyyu* is not the same as it was previously [under Abid Iley]’, adding that its priority is to contain clashes between local militants and secure the border, which they acknowledge is poorly demarcated and thus leaves room for local level confrontations.<sup>249</sup> At the

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242 ‘Fresh clashes near Oromia, Somali regions’, *Addis Standard*.

243 *Qeerroo Bilisummaa Oromoo* (‘Oromo Youth Movement for Freedom’), an outlet for pro-OLA–OLF statements, covered the clashes near Chinaksen; for example, see: <https://qbo-abo-wbo.org/?s=Cinaaksan>.

244 Jarsoo Group, Facebook post, 18 July 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/270802613695647/photos/a.272087650233810/1222918565150709/>.

245 Interview with Gerri academic, 3 January 2024; observations by the authors based on recurrent visit to the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands between 2018 and 2024.

246 Informal discussion with NGO worker, UNICEF, Jigjiga, 27 December 2023; interview with scholar and expert on IDP camps, Jigjiga, 20 January 2024.

247 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

248 Interview with journalist who covered the conflict, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024; interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

249 Interview with deputy security head of SRS, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

same time, however, the problem for Mustafe Omer is that his restraint in responding to these incursions is unpopular among competing clans, even seen as ‘a sell out of the Somali cause’.<sup>250</sup> In Merer and Mekanisa, Mustafe Omer’s critics and the Gerri feel he ceded territorial control to Oromia in the vicinity of Jigjiga.<sup>251</sup>

After several meetings with Jarso elders in which Mustafe pledged to restore security, facilitate the return of IDPs and restore land to Jarsos residing in the SRS, the clashes over Mekanisa threatened to undo the trust that he had tried to rebuild with the Jarso community. A high-level bilateral meeting between Mustafe and Shimelis was held in Dire Dawa in mid-April, where the issues of the Merar dam construction and the creation of Mekanisa woreda were addressed. According to a local reporter who observed the meeting, both leaders agreed to restore security to ensure that upstream Oromo and downstream Somali communities in the Deda Waled valley would benefit equally from the irrigation of the micro-dam.<sup>252</sup> A Jarso elder supports this: ‘The Jarso and Gerri brothers [and sisters] and all other minorities in the Deda Waled area may benefit in unity from Merer dam, which is safely situated within the Oromia region.’<sup>253</sup> Mustafe reportedly offered financial support for the dam construction project, perhaps to ensure co-ownership, but Shimelis declined, noting that the ORS had secured sufficient funds to finalize it.<sup>254</sup> While construction had been temporarily halted amid fighting, Oromo lawmakers and the Jarso lobbied for the finalization of the project.<sup>255</sup> After Oromia–Somali peacebuilding initiatives stopped in 2022, a new cross-boundary forum was organized in July 2023 for community members from Chinaksen and Tuli Guled to ‘openly discuss any administrative and governance issues that could threaten peaceful coexistence’.<sup>256</sup> Oromo and Somali diaspora also called for inter-ethnic peace following the brief uptick in border clashes in 2023 and the transregional tensions following the Ethiopia–Somaliland MoU signed in January 2024.<sup>257</sup>

After the clashes in Merar and Mekanisa, however, some activists continued to aggravate the situation. Somali diaspora critics of Cagjar (Mustafe’s nickname) used social media to complain that the ORS creation of Makaniis (Somali spelling), which they claim (based on the constitution) is part of the SRS, cuts off parts of Tuli Guled, Fafen and Awbare from Jigjiga,

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250 Hagmann, ‘Fast Politics, Slow Justice’, 4.

251 Interview with independent academic, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

252 AbdiKeni Mohammed, Facebook post, 15 April 2023. Accessed 25 February 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/JigJigaawi/posts/pfbidoUKAxe3VrjXryn7ucn7KN2tRyE4vmdZJjydmdbd8HffT2FEwXkRnFcXsnBJw4CCjJQQL>.

253 Interview with Somali-Jarso elder, Jigjiga, 23 January 2024.

254 AbdiKeni, Facebook post.

255 *Ogaal Media*, Facebook post.

256 ‘EIP Executed Public Forum in Chinaksen and Tuluguled Woreda’, Ethiopian Institute of Peace, 7 July 2023. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://eipethiopia.org/?p=3127>.

257 Abba Ayaan, ‘Security and Prosperity not possible while Oromos and Somalis are at Odds’, *Curate Oromia*, 14 January 2024. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://curateoromia.com/security-and-prosperity-not-possible-while-oromos-somalis-are-at-odds/>.



the capital city of the SRS.<sup>258</sup> Engaging in fear-mongering, one activist warns that Jigjiga will be a step closer to becoming a chartered city surrounded by the Oromia region, which will for the first time in its history border Somaliland.<sup>259</sup> The Congress for Somali Cause issued a statement that criticized Mustafe for letting Abiy's government convert a 'small kebele called Mekanisa inside the Somali Regional State into a district with the intent of illegally expanding the scope of this kebele by swallowing Somali villages around it and to have a direct corridor to the border'.<sup>260</sup>

Similarly, in the Afar-Somali-Issa conflict over administrative control of three borderland kebeles (Adaytu, Gadamaytu and Undhufo), the Issa feel that Mustafe had relented on ensuring that the areas be incorporated into Sitti zone in the SRS.<sup>261</sup> Other accounts assert that Mustafe had initially provoked *Liyu*-backed confrontations between the Issa and Afar in early 2020.<sup>262</sup> In part, this was to gain acceptance among Somali clans in the SRS, which viewed his rapid ascent to regional power under Abiy and joining the PP with scepticism.<sup>263</sup> In contrast to Abdi Iley, who had styled himself as a defender of Gerri interests and upgraded the administrative status of Tuli Guled in 2016, Mustafe delicately balances his relations with his Oromo counterparts, who now hold the centre of power in Ethiopian politics.<sup>264</sup> The ORS donation of a secondary school compound in Jigjiga in late March 2023<sup>265</sup> and the renewed peace meetings between Shimelis and Mustafe in Dire Dawa immediately following the clashes over Merar and Mekanisa earlier in the year<sup>266</sup> were also met with suspicion by Mustafe's critics.<sup>267</sup> Contravening Mustafe's tweet<sup>268</sup> a year earlier—that the Somali periphery had now become part of the centre of Ethiopian politics—his restraint in the Oromia–Somali borderlands is increasingly interpreted as subservience to ORS leadership.

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<sup>258</sup> Arkan, 'Ethiopia: Oromia and Somali Region'.

<sup>259</sup> Arkan, 'Ethiopia: Oromia and Somali Region'.

<sup>260</sup> Congress for Somali Cause, Facebook post.

<sup>261</sup> Dawud Mohammed, 'Ethiopia Conflict Trends Report: Afar Region', Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute, 2024, 5. Accessed 25 February 2025, <https://riftvalley.net/publication/ethiopia-conflict-trends-report-afar-region/>.

<sup>262</sup> At the time, the *Liyu* was under command of Hajji Mahmoud and regional police commissioner, Cali Samire (who was dismissed following his comments about the Merer controversy).

<sup>263</sup> 'Ethiopia: Continuing clashes over ethnic federalism', *Africa Intelligence*, 27 March 2020. Accessed 27 February 2025, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-africa-and-the-horn/2020/03/27/continuing-clashes-over-ethnic-federalism,108399452-art>.

<sup>264</sup> Hagmann, 'Fast Politics, Slow Justice'.

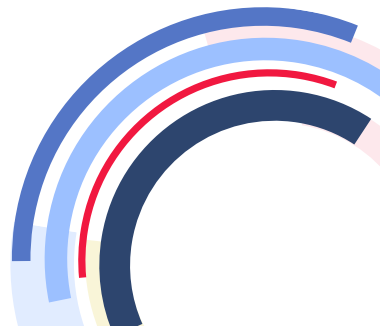
<sup>265</sup> Mustafe M Omer (@Mustafe\_M\_Omer), X post, 28 March 2023. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://x.com/Mustafe\\_M\\_Omer/status/164077696098615297](https://x.com/Mustafe_M_Omer/status/164077696098615297).

<sup>266</sup> AbdiKeni, Facebook post.

<sup>267</sup> Interview with independent academic, Jigjiga, 21 January 2024.

<sup>268</sup> Mustafe M Omer (@Mustafe\_M\_Omer), X post, 15 March 2022. Accessed 25 February 2025, [https://x.com/Mustafe\\_M\\_Omer/status/150372599577576966](https://x.com/Mustafe_M_Omer/status/150372599577576966).

In late 2023 and early 2024, the administrative and institutional build up of Mekanisa went ahead unabated. Several woreda offices (for example, finance) were still based in Chinaksen woreda due to security concerns. Latent tensions and mutual suspicion continued to hinder unfettered transport and socio-economic interactions between Chinaksen and Tuli Guled. Over the course of 2024, the ORS and East Hararghe zone continued to invest in the administrative and infrastructural build up, including the provisioning of social services (schools, health facilities, etc.). The Mekanisa communication bureau actively provided updates on the development projects in the new woreda. The newfound economic importance of the wheat cluster farming in the vicinity of Mekanisa were praised during joint visits by Shimelis, the ORS president, and Miski, the East Hararghe leader. Bustling social service provisions and economic activities suggest that Mekanisa is firmly under the administrative control of the ORS, with no indication that this will be challenged by the SRS.



# CONCLUSION

Under the Prosperity Party (PP), policy-driven regional and sub-regional administrative changes, territorial claims and resource politics by competing regional governments—Oromia Regional State (ORS) and Somali Regional State (SRS)—have reshaped peace and conflict dynamics across the long contested Oromia–Somali borderlands. Tensions have persisted against the backdrop of the implementation of ethnic federalism in 1995, the contentious Oromia–Somali regional border disputes and the 2004 referendum that complicated identity-based administrative issues. Factoring in the 2017–2019 inter-regional border war and its aftermath, the relative peace and stability that was achieved in the eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands between 2019 and 2022 is remarkable. In part, this was enabled by inter-regional and inter-community-level peace talks, and the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), where possible. Over the course of 2023, however, several violent clashes in the still heavily militarized eastern Oromia–Somali borderlands briefly interrupted the peace. In early 2023, militia clashes around the Chinaksen and Tuli Guled woredas were sparked by inter-regional competition and contestation over administrative territories, as well as underlying issues related to infrastructural investments (e.g. Merer dam), access to resources (agricultural land, water) and potential revenue streams, in the borderlands.

This report examined the reasons for the clashes and assessed the potential risks of further conflict escalation, especially between the Jarso and Gerri groups inhabiting the Chinaksen and Tuli Guled districts in the ORS and the SRS, respectively. Both groups have a long history of conflict, with recent regional administrative changes renewing tensions. ORS administrative changes to improve governance in the borderlands were perceived by the SRS as unilateral moves, thus evoking long-held mutual mistrust over alleged ethno-territorial expansionism on both sides. In particular, the ORS decision to upgrade Mekanisa—just a ‘few villages’, according to the SRS—from a kebele to a woreda created conflict. Carved out of Chinaksen woreda, where the Jarso clan is demographically and politically dominant, Mekanisa was co-inhabited by the Gerri, with some arguing it should therefore be part of the SRS.

Similarly, the construction of a micro-dam in Merer kebele by the ORS government resulted in clashes and accusations that the dam project would pose an upstream advantage for irrigated wheat production in Chinaksen against downstream wheat production efforts in Tuli Guled. Territorial administration in the Deda Waled valley remains contested as the regional borders remain insufficiently demarcated, while ethnic and clan identities remain divided between belonging either to the Oromo or Somali side. This leaves room for territorial claims. Where access to resources in the valley (land and water) are crucial for local livelihoods and regional revenues, investment projects in long contested areas can quickly result in distributive struggles. They also risk being interpreted as attempts by either regional state to create facts

on the ground. That is, to make administrative authority over and governance of territory and resources permanent and legitimate through the presence of an ethnic or clan demographic majority, the build up of local state institutions or undertaking development projects.

While it is possible that the ostensive restraint shown by SRS leadership in relations to both Mekanisa and Merer contributed to de-escalate tensions, at the same time this poses a risk to Mustafe Omer's regional leadership. He is seen by his own constituents and clan competitors as subservient to his Oromo counterparts, who now play a dominant role in the PP government. Moreover, peace and stability were quickly restored through the resumption of inter-regional and intercommunal level dialogue meetings, which had been increasingly neglected since early 2022. Community consultation and continued customary reconciliation at the local level between the Jarso and Gerri communities appears crucial to ensuring that any impending changes, through possible administrative reforms or economic interventions, are transparently discussed, openly negotiated and consensually implemented. There is a risk, however, that mutual mistrust at the local and regional levels can result in the escalation of what might otherwise be considered minor political or economic changes. This is especially the case when local disputes in the Oromia-Somali borderlands are strategically ethnicized or enmeshed in wider geopolitical projects and fast shifting transnational alliances across the Ethio-Somaliland and -Somalia borderlands.

The signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the federal government of Ethiopia and Somaliland in early January 2024 is perhaps a case in point. This move by the Abiy government has both angered Somalia and temporarily put SRS leadership in an awkward position. Despite the signing of the Ankara agreement in December 2024, which calls for Ethiopia to recognize Somalia's territorial sovereignty, as well as the election of Abdirahman Mohamed Abdullahi as new president in Somaliland, a potential port deal between Ethiopia and Somaliland is not necessarily off the table so long as Ethiopia does not officially abandon the MoU.<sup>269</sup> With the geostrategic situation between Ethiopia and its Red Sea neighbours so volatile, local actors in the Oromia-Somali borderlands are anxious to forge beneficial alliances.

A perceived shift in transnational alliances, with political elites from Oromia and the Gadabuursi, who occupy and administer territories in both the SRS (Ethiopia) and Awdal state (Somaliland), allegedly aligning their interests, has raised suspicions among the Gerri and Ogadeeni (Darood) SRS constituents. The specific fear is that Oromia may seek to annex territories to forge advantageous transport access via the border crossing in Borama to the port, although alternative alliance constellations are also seen as possible (for example, Jarso-Issaak seeking a Dir clan alliance revival). While there is no proof to warrant such suspicions and rumours, the danger is that they may escalate unsettled boundary and resource disputes across the Oromia-Somali borderlands. Institutionalized resource and revenue competition between regional states in the Ethiopian federation continue to risk resulting in cross-border conflicts and undermining peacebuilding efforts.

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269 Tunbridge, 'Somaliland's New President'.

## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

Between late 2019 and 2022, high-level ORS and SRS officials have pledged mutual commitment to resolving tensions in the eastern borderlands at annual peace conferences and through joint committees. IDP returns were also part of efforts to restore stability. When these initiatives dwindled, however, this was followed by an increase in violent confrontations in 2023. Moreover, customary conflict resolution institutions and peacebuilding mechanisms historically shared by both Oromo and Somali communities in the borderlands have largely been co-opted or sidelined by the two regional governments. In general, the role of cross-boundary and people-to-people peace and reconciliation and conflict mitigation processes have played a fairly marginal and temporary role. To reverse this trend, the following key issues for ensuring more effective peacebuilding in the Oromia–Somali borderlands should be considered.

### **Address unresolved issues**

Two key unresolved issues recurrently lead to border conflicts: overlapping borderland claims and unclear border demarcations. These outstanding issues should be addressed through inter-regional and intercommunal dialogue prior to enforcing unilateral administrative reforms or undertaking infrastructural development projects.

### **Renew cross-regional cooperation**

Revitalizing regional and zone-level cooperation is essential for working towards borderland peace and stability, along with IDP repatriation. This could be complemented by formally recognizing and facilitating independent customary and grassroots conflict resolution and reconciliation institutions and mechanisms, including customs (*xeer*) which are shared by Oromo–Somali borderland communities.

### **Recognize the potential for destabilization**

It is crucial to recognize that inter-regional and inter-ethnic conflicts in the Oromia–Somali borderlands are prone to wider geopolitical and transnational proxy conflicts. Proactive measures should be taken to transparently address fears and rumours and properly communicate administrative reforms to prevent resulting local tensions. The role of regional governments in communicating this down the chain of command at the community level and between regional administrative counterparts, is equally important in Ethiopia’s multinational federal context.

### **Address accusations of expansionism**

Accusations of ethno-territorial expansionism must be addressed and nuanced at all levels of government and during inter-regional and intercommunal negotiations. Clear communication and dialogue are essential for dispelling misunderstanding and building trust. Likewise, federal legislation directives which drive regional governments to compete with each other economically over resources and revenues, should factor in the distributive conflict potential that this bears.

### **Avoid unilateral actions**

Top-down regional state imposed administrative reforms along the Oromia–Somali borderlands should be approached with caution, recognizing their potential for controversy

and territorial disputes among counterparts. Both regions could engage in joint negotiations involving independent mediators and community-level stakeholders (inclusive, representative) to mitigate tensions and find a consensus or mutually agreeable compromises.

### **Establish mutual trust**

Taking steps to establish mutual trust and coordination between leaders and community members on both sides of the regional borderlands is required for ensuring that the Oromia and Somali regional forces (stationed in the heavily militarized eastern borderlands) and clan militias can be gradually disarmed, demobilized and possibly reintegrated into society (DDR). Customary peace and reconciliation mechanisms shared by Oromo and Somali communities could potentially guide such regional level DDR processes.

### **Engage in the National Dialogue process**

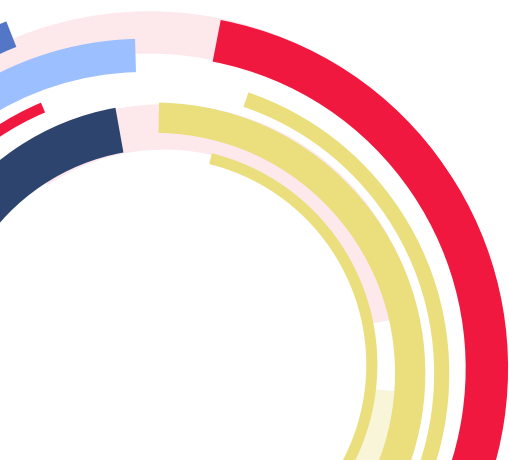
Bringing intercommunal grievances and accounts of injustice in the Oromia–Somali borderlands to the table of Ethiopia’s ongoing National Dialogue (ND) or transitional justice (TJ) process may be an additional way to address past grievance and achieve reconciliation between neighbouring communities. Opposition parties in both regions (e.g. the Oromo Federalist Congress or the ONLF) have however rejected the ND for being top-down and non-inclusive. Nevertheless, elevating past violations, including displacement as a result of the 2017–2019 inter-regional border war and subsequent skirmishes, to the national level ensures that localized conflicts are also considered and atrocities addressed beyond the regional government level. At the same time, to dispel suspicions among both Oromo and Somali communities that the national-level ND and TJ processes are primarily performative and serve the interest of the federal government, the processes themselves must become fully inclusive, independent and impartial. These processes have much to learn from the positive and negative experiences of the Somali regional truth and reconciliation commission established in 2021 to deal with past human rights abuses and rebuild trust. It is imperative, furthermore, that any integration into national peace and reconciliation processes be counterbalanced with independent customary dialogue between the local communities.



# GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS, WORDS AND PHRASES

<i>agar</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) peripheral affiliate
<i>Caffee</i>	( <i>Oromiffa</i> ) legislative council (Oromia Regional State)
ENDF	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPRDF	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
ESDL	Ethiopian Somali Democratic League
<i>Fatno</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) rapid response forces
<i>Gachana Sirna</i>	( <i>Oromiffa</i> ) guardians of the regime
<i>garad</i>	( <i>Somali</i> ) clan chiefs
IDMC	Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
IDP	internally displaced person
IFLO	Islamic Front for the Liberation of Oromia
<i>kebele</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) lowest administrative unit; ward or neighbourhood)
<i>khat</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) mildly narcotic plant ( <i>Catha edulis</i> ) native to the Horn of Africa
<i>kilil</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) regional states
<i>Liyu</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) 'Special' Somali regional state police
<i>Liyu hail</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) 'Special' Oromia regional state forces
<i>medemer</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) lit. addition; coming together
MoU	memorandum of understanding
ND	National Dialogue
NEBE	National Election Board of Ethiopia
OLF	Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF	Ogaden National Liberation Front

OPDO	Oromo People’s Democratic Organization
OPP	Oromia Prosperity Party
ORS	Oromia Regional State
PP	Prosperity Party
<i>qeerroo</i>	( <i>Oromiffa</i> ) lit. bachelor; Oromo youth activists
SPDP	Somali People’s Democratic Party
SRS	Somali Regional State
TGE	Transitional Government of Ethiopia (1991–1995)
TJ	Transitional Justice
TPLF	Tigray People’s Liberation Front
<i>woreda</i>	( <i>Amharic</i> ) third-level administrative unit; district
WSLF	Western Somali Liberation Front
<i>xeer</i>	( <i>Somali</i> ) Somali customary law, also common in eastern Oromia





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