

KENADID INSTITUTE FOR POLICY & DEVELOPMENT (KIPD)*Policy Article | Garowe, Puntland, Somalia | August 2026*

Galkayo at the Crossroads

Recurrent Conflict, Political and Security Sensitivity, and the Search for Durable Peace in a City at the Heart of Somalia

Executive Summary

Galkayo, the principal city of Somalia's Mudug region, has experienced recurrent political, communal, and security-related conflict from the colonial period to the present day, while also producing some of the country's most instructive examples of negotiated peace. This article traces that history through its main episodes: the colonial reordering of the 1920s; the confrontation between the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF) and the military government in the 1980s; the USC–SSDF war of 1991–1993 and the Mudug Peace Agreement that ended it; the inter-administration crises of 2015–2016 and the ceasefire, accords, and joint police force that followed; recurrent inter-clan disputes, including those involving the Lelkase and Sa'ad communities; the threat posed by violent extremist groups; and the boundary and federal–state sensitivities that shape the current tension of mid-2026. The article argues that Galkayo's vulnerability is structural rather than inevitable, that every major conflict in the city's modern history has ended in a negotiated agreement, and that targeted investment in the city's existing peace architecture, insulated from external political disputes, can convert managed tension into durable peace, with benefits extending to all of Somalia.

Introduction

Few places in Somalia carry the weight of history that Galkayo does. The city sits at the geographic centre of the country, at the meeting point of major clan families, two Federal Member States, and the main trade corridor linking the port of Bosaso to central and southern Somalia. For nearly a century, Galkayo has been both a bridge and a fault line: a commercial hub through which people, livestock, and goods move every day, and a recurring theatre of political and communal conflict whose effects have been felt far beyond Mudug region.

This article, prepared by the Kenadid Institute for Policy & Development (KIPD), traces the pattern of conflict in and around Galkayo from the colonial period to the present, examines the peace agreements and local mechanisms that have repeatedly pulled the city back from the brink, and analyses why the city remains structurally vulnerable to renewed violence. It concludes with practical recommendations for consolidating peace in Galkayo, and argues that a durable settlement in this one city would be a significant contribution to stability in Somalia as a whole. The analysis is offered in a spirit of impartiality. KIPD does not attribute blame to any community, administration, or institution; the purpose is to understand a shared problem and to support a shared solution.

A City Shaped by History: The Colonial Period and the Roots of Division

Galkayo's strategic importance predates the modern Somali state. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the area lay between the spheres of the Majeerteen Sultanate in the north-east and the Sultanate of Hobyo founded by Sultan Yusuf Ali Kenadid in the central regions. Italian colonial expansion in the 1920s, which forcibly dismantled both sultanates during the so-called pacification campaigns of 1925 to 1927¹, brought the wider Mudug area under a single colonial administration but did not erase the underlying social geography. Galkayo emerged as a garrison

¹ I. M. Lewis, *A Modern History of the Somali*, 4th ed. (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).

and market town where the settlement patterns of the Omar Mahmoud sub-clan of the Majeerteen (Darod) in the north, the Sa'ad sub-clan of the Habar Gidir (Hawiye) in the south, and Dir and Lelkase (Darod) communities in adjacent quarters and districts were consolidated rather than integrated.

Colonial and post-independence administrations treated Mudug as a single unit, but decisions over land, wells, grazing corridors, and administrative appointments repeatedly touched sensitive communal interests. By the time of independence in 1960, Galkayo was already a city in which local politics and clan geography were tightly interwoven, a characteristic that has shaped every subsequent episode of conflict and every attempt at peace.

The SSDF and the Military Government (1978–1991)

The first major armed conflict of the post-independence era to touch Mudug directly followed the failed coup attempt of April 1978 against the military government of President Mohamed Siad Barre. Officers associated with the attempt, many of them from the north-eastern regions, subsequently founded the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), the country's first organised armed opposition movement, operating largely from Ethiopian territory under the leadership of Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf Ahmed.

In 1982, SSDF forces, supported by Ethiopian units, captured the border towns of Balanbale and Galdogob in Mudug region², prompting a prolonged military confrontation with government forces. The government's counterinsurgency response in Mudug and the north-east during the 1980s was severe and fell heavily on civilian communities, deepening grievances that would resurface after the state's collapse. The SSDF–government conflict established Mudug as a militarised frontier and left behind weapons, trenches, and mistrust that later conflicts would inherit.

State Collapse and the USC–SSDF War (1991–1993)

The fall of the military government in January 1991 transformed Galkayo from a provincial garrison town into the front line of a national war. As the United Somali Congress (USC), under General Mohamed Farah Aideed, pushed north-east and the SSDF regrouped to defend the north-eastern regions, the two forces met in and around Galkayo. The fighting of 1991 to 1993 was among the most destructive episodes in the city's history: neighbourhoods changed hands, thousands of families were displaced, and the city was effectively partitioned along the line that still defines it today.

The war ended not through outright victory but through negotiation. The Mudug Peace Agreement of June 1993³, concluded between General Aideed and Colonel Abdullahi Yusuf with the active involvement of clan elders on both sides, established a ceasefire, arrangements for the shared use of the city and its surrounding grazing lands, and a practical understanding that northern Galkayo would be administered from the north-east while southern Galkayo would be administered by the communities of the south. Although never fully implemented in all its provisions, the 1993 agreement proved remarkably resilient. It allowed markets to reopen, roads to function, and a generation of traders to do business across the line. It remains the foundational reference point for every subsequent peace arrangement in the city.

Federalism and the 2015–2016 Crises: The Abdiweli Gaas and Abdikarim Guled Administrations

The establishment of Puntland in 1998, with northern Galkayo as the capital of its Mudug region, and the later formation of Galmudug, which designated Galkayo as its own capital, layered a new

² Lewis, A Modern History of the Somali; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), Somalia conflict data for Mudug region, 1997–2026.

³ Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), documentation of the Mudug Peace Agreement, June 1993, Garowe.

institutional dimension onto an older communal divide. What had been a line between communities became also an administrative boundary between two Federal Member States, each with its own security forces, revenue interests, and political constituencies.

This new dimension was tested severely in 2015 and 2016, during the administrations of President Abdiweli Mohamed Ali “Gaas” in Puntland and President Abdikarim Hussein Guled in Galmudug. Disputes over the formation of the Galmudug administration, the status of the city, land on the boundary line, and the conduct of security forces escalated into open clashes in late 2015 and again, more seriously, in October and November 2016. The 2016 fighting killed dozens of people, wounded many more, and displaced an estimated 90,000 residents, according to United Nations humanitarian reporting⁴, emptying whole districts of the city. Schools and health facilities closed, trade across the line collapsed, and the humanitarian consequences spread across Mudug at a time when the region was already absorbing drought-affected and displaced populations.

It is important to record, in fairness to both administrations, that the same leaderships that presided over the crisis also concluded the agreements that ended it. A ceasefire was reached in November 2016 with the support of the Federal Government, the United Nations, and neighbouring states, and follow-up agreements signed in Galkayo in January 2017⁵ committed both sides to withdraw forces, dismantle defensive positions, exchange detainees, compensate victims, and establish joint security mechanisms. These commitments, though imperfectly implemented, ended large-scale hostilities and opened the way for the most constructive period of inter-administration cooperation the city has known.

The Joint Police Force and Federal Engagement under the Farmaajo Administration

A central innovation of the post-2016 peace architecture was the creation of a joint police presence for Galkayo. Under the federal administration of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed “Farmaajo”, and in coordination with both the Puntland and Galmudug state governments, a joint police force drawing personnel from both sides of the city was trained, deployed, and mandated to monitor the ceasefire line, patrol shared spaces, and respond jointly to incidents that might otherwise escalate along communal lines. The force operated with support from the Federal Government, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia, and international partners⁶, and was complemented by joint security committees bringing together regional governors, mayors, and police commanders from both administrations.

The significance of this arrangement went beyond policing. For the first time since 1991, uniformed personnel from both sides of Galkayo worked under a shared mandate in the service of the whole city. When incidents occurred, whether criminal, communal, or political, there was a mechanism through which commanders could communicate within minutes rather than mobilise within hours. The joint force did not resolve the underlying political questions, and its capacity and resourcing fluctuated over the years, but it demonstrated that cooperative security in Galkayo is achievable when federal and state authorities align behind it.

Inter-Clan Conflicts: Omar Mohamud–Sa'ad, Lelkase–Sa'ad, and Other Communal Disputes

Alongside the political conflicts between administrations, Galkayo and the wider Mudug region have experienced recurrent inter-klan disputes, most of them rooted in competition over rangeland, water points, land ownership on the urban periphery, and unresolved compensation

⁴ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Somalia Humanitarian Needs Overviews and flash updates on Galkayo displacement, 2016–2026.

⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission in Somalia (UNSOM), statements on the Galkayo ceasefire and joint police force, 2016–2018.

⁶ International Crisis Group, Galkayo and Somalia's Dangerous Faultlines (Nairobi/Brussels, 2015); UNSOM, statements on the Galkayo ceasefire and joint police force, see note 5 above.

claims arising from earlier violence. The most frequent of these have involved the Omar Mohamud sub-clan of the Majeerteen (Darod) and the Sa'ad sub-clan of the Habar Gidir (Hawiye), whose grazing territories and settlement areas meet along the rural approaches to the city; clashes between the two communities recur over access to pasture and water sources, and periodically escalate into revenge killings stemming from earlier incidents⁷. Episodes of tension and armed clashes involving the Lelkase and Sa'ad communities in the rural districts east and south of the city, where grazing corridors and settlement claims intersect, have also been among the most consequential in recent years. Similar disputes have periodically involved other communities of Mudug, including localised confrontations over farmland, district boundaries, and revenge killings that follow the familiar cycle of incident, retaliation, and mediation⁸.

Two features of these communal conflicts deserve emphasis. First, they are rarely contained by administrative boundaries: a rural dispute can draw in urban relatives, and an urban incident can inflame rural front lines, which is precisely what makes Galkayo so sensitive. Second, they have consistently been resolved, or at least suspended, through traditional mechanisms. Councils of elders, religious leaders, business figures, and women's groups have negotiated ceasefires, blood-compensation settlements, and grazing arrangements, often faster than formal institutions could act. Recent years have seen a series of locally brokered inter-clan agreements across Mudug, several of them concluded with the joint encouragement of the two state administrations, which have kept individual incidents from escalating into wider confrontation.

Al-Shabaab, Violent Extremism, and the Security of Mudug

Galkayo's vulnerability is compounded by the threat of violent extremist groups. Al-Shabaab has repeatedly sought to exploit the city's divisions and its position on the north–south corridor. The group has carried out attacks inside Galkayo, including bombings in 2016 that killed and injured dozens of civilians and security personnel⁹, and has used the rural spaces of Mudug and the Galgala hills further north as transit and infiltration routes toward Puntland. Puntland's security forces, alongside Galmudug and federal forces, have conducted sustained operations against both Al-Shabaab and ISIS-affiliated militants in the north-east.

The extremist threat interacts dangerously with local conflict. Every episode of inter-administration or inter-clan tension diverts security attention and resources away from counterterrorism, thins out checkpoints, and creates the disorder in which militant networks move most freely. Conversely, every period of cooperation between the two halves of the city has measurably improved the joint monitoring of movement through Mudug. In this sense, peace in Galkayo is not only a local good; it is a national security requirement.

Boundary Sensitivity and Federal–State Tensions

The boundary between Puntland and Galmudug, which runs through Galkayo itself and across the rangelands of Mudug, has never been formally demarcated in a manner accepted by all parties. This ambiguity keeps questions of taxation, land allocation, service delivery, and policing jurisdiction permanently open, and it means that even routine administrative decisions can be read as boundary claims. The sensitivity is heightened by the fact that Galkayo serves simultaneously as the capital of Puntland's Mudug region and as a capital city of Galmudug, an arrangement with no exact parallel elsewhere in Somalia.

Layered above this is the periodic tension between the Federal Government and the Puntland administration over constitutional, electoral, and security questions. When relations between Garowe and Mogadishu deteriorate, as they have during several periods including the present one,

⁷ ACLED, Somalia conflict data for Mudug region, 1997–2026; Interpeace and Puntland Development Research Center (PDRC), *The Puntland Experience: A Bottom-Up Approach to Peace and State Building* (Pillars of Peace series), Garowe.

⁸ Interpeace and PDRC, *The Puntland Experience*, see note 7 above.

⁹ ACLED, Somalia conflict data for Mudug region, 1997–2026.

Galkayo tends to feel the consequences first, because it is the place where forces and political constituencies aligned with different centres of authority stand closest to one another. The current environment, in mid-2026, illustrates the pattern clearly: reported deployments and counter-deployments around the city¹⁰, public warnings between administrations regarding the movement of forces and materiel, and a wider federal–state dispute that has already produced armed confrontation elsewhere in the north-east have combined to raise anxiety in Galkayo to its highest level in several years. It is a measure of how quickly the situation can move that a city which hosted routine joint security coordination meetings in March 2026¹¹ found itself, by late July, the subject of national warnings about a possible new front.

At the same time, the response of local actors during the current tension has been encouraging. Security officials, governors, mayors, and traditional leaders from both sides of the city have maintained communication, held joint meetings, and publicly committed to keeping Galkayo out of disputes that originate elsewhere. This pattern of frequent, institutionalised contact between clan leaders, governors, and mayors of the two administrations, meeting both routinely and urgently whenever a potential flashpoint emerges, has become one of the city's most valuable, if least visible, assets. It deserves recognition and support precisely because it works quietly.

The Human Cost: Mudug as a Complex Emergency

Decades of recurrent conflict have left Galkayo and the wider Mudug region in a state that humanitarian agencies describe as a complex emergency¹², in which armed conflict, displacement, climatic shocks, and weak services reinforce one another. The city hosts tens of thousands of internally displaced people on both sides of the line, many displaced multiple times by successive rounds of fighting and drought. Repeated destruction and the ever-present risk of renewed violence have discouraged the long-term private investment that a city of Galkayo's commercial importance would otherwise attract. Businesses hedge, capital stays liquid or leaves, insurance and credit remain scarce, and public infrastructure is rebuilt only to the standard that uncertainty justifies.

The opportunity cost is enormous. Galkayo sits at the heart of the Bosaso trade corridor and could serve as the logistics, livestock, and services hub of central Somalia. Studies of the Galkayo borderlands¹³ have consistently found that recurrent political and communal conflict is the principal factor limiting the city's economic potential. Every year of fragile calm recovers a little of that potential; every relapse destroys years of accumulation. The communities of Galkayo have paid, in lives, livelihoods, and lost futures, for conflicts that in many cases did not begin in their city and were not of their making.

Why Galkayo Remains Vulnerable: A Fragility Analysis

Reading the city's history as a whole, five structural drivers of vulnerability stand out. The first is unresolved status: the boundary and the constitutional standing of the city have never been settled in a form accepted by all parties, so every crisis reopens the same questions. The second is the layering of conflict systems. Communal disputes, inter-administration rivalry, federal–state tension, and violent extremism operate simultaneously and can ignite one another; a rural grazing dispute, an urban crime, or a political quarrel in distant capitals can each become the spark. The third is militarisation, since generations of conflict have left the city and its hinterland saturated

¹⁰ Critical Threats Project, Africa File: Puntland Standoff with the Federal Government of Somalia, 16 July 2026; Horseed Media, “Troop Deployments Heighten Tensions along Puntland–Galmudug Border,” 29 July 2026; WardheerNews, “Calm Returns to Galkayo as Puntland Tightens Security,” July 2026.

¹¹ Axadle Times, “Puntland State and Galmudug Security Committees Meet in Galkayo to Strengthen Coordination,” 16 March 2026.

¹² OCHA, Somalia Humanitarian Needs Overviews and flash updates on Galkayo displacement, see note 4 above.

¹³ Rift Valley Institute (X-Border Local Research Network), *Contested Commerce: Revenue and State-Making in the Galkayo Borderlands*, 2025.

with weapons and organised armed capacity on all sides, shortening the distance between tension and violence. The fourth is socio-economic pressure, as displacement, youth unemployment, and climatic shocks supply a constant pool of grievance. The fifth is dependence on informal mechanisms: the elders' councils, business networks, and joint committees that keep the peace are effective, but they remain under-resourced, dependent on individual personalities, and not yet anchored in durable institutions.

None of these drivers is insurmountable, and it is worth stating plainly what the record shows: every single major conflict in Galkayo's modern history has ended in a negotiated agreement, from the Mudug Agreement of 1993 to the ceasefire and follow-up accords of 2016 and 2017 to the many local inter-clan settlements since. The city's problem has never been an absence of peacemakers. It has been the absence of arrangements strong enough to hold between crises.

Recommendations: From Managed Tension to Durable Peace

Drawing on this analysis, KIPD offers the following recommendations to the two state administrations, the Federal Government, the communities of Galkayo, and Somalia's international partners.

1. Insulate Galkayo from external disputes. The Federal Government, Puntland, and Galmudug should adopt and publicise an explicit understanding that political disagreements at the national level will not be pursued through deployments, recruitment, or political mobilisation in and around Galkayo. The city should be treated, by common consent, as a protected space.
2. Revive and adequately resource joint security mechanisms. The joint police model established after 2016 remains the most successful security experiment in the city's history and should be renewed with predictable funding, joint training, shared communications, and clear command protocols agreed by both administrations, with federal and international support that is acceptable to all parties.
3. Institutionalise the leaders' dialogue. The existing practice of frequent meetings between clan elders, governors, and mayors from both administrations should be formalised into a standing Galkayo Peace and Coordination Forum with a small permanent secretariat, an early-warning function, and the mandate to convene within hours of any incident. Women and youth representatives should hold permanent seats, since both constituencies have repeatedly proven decisive in de-escalation.
4. Address the communal agenda directly. Outstanding compensation claims, land disputes on the urban periphery, and grazing and water arrangements in contested rural areas, including those affecting the Lelkase, Sa'ad, and neighbouring communities, should be catalogued and worked through systematically by a joint commission supported by traditional authorities, rather than left to resurface incident by incident.
5. Defer the boundary question, but manage it. Formal demarcation is unlikely to be achievable soon and attempting it prematurely could itself trigger conflict. Instead, the two administrations should agree written practical protocols on taxation, land allocation, and policing along the line, so that day-to-day administration cannot be mistaken for territorial claim.
6. Invest in the peace dividend. Partners should concentrate visible joint investments, in markets, water, health, education, and youth employment, on projects that serve both sides of the city and are jointly managed, so that residents experience cooperation as materially better than confrontation.
7. Maintain a united front against violent extremism. Intelligence sharing and coordinated operations between Puntland, Galmudug, and federal forces in Mudug should be ring-fenced from political disputes, recognising that any security vacuum in the city will be exploited by actors hostile to all sides.

Conclusion: Galkayo's Peace is Somalia's Peace

Galkayo has often been described as a divided city, but its deeper story is one of coexistence maintained under extraordinary pressure. For more than three decades, its communities have traded, intermarried, studied, and worshipped across a line that armies could not erase, and its leaders, on both sides, have repeatedly chosen negotiation over destruction, sometimes within days of open fighting. That record is the city's real inheritance, and it is the foundation on which a durable peace can be built.

The stakes extend far beyond Mudug. Galkayo is where Somalia's federal experiment, its communal reconciliation, and its struggle against violent extremism all intersect in a single municipality. If cooperative policing, institutionalised dialogue, and shared investment can hold the peace here, in the most sensitive city in the country, they can hold it anywhere, and the model will be studied and replicated. If, instead, the city is allowed to become the arena for disputes that originate elsewhere, the costs will again be borne by families who have already paid too much, and the consequences will ripple through the entire national project. The choice, as it has been at every turning point since 1993, belongs to leaders on all sides. The experience of Galkayo suggests that when they choose dialogue, the city responds, and when the city is at peace, all of Somalia is stronger for it.

The Kenadid Institute for Policy & Development stands ready to support all parties, through research, dialogue facilitation, and policy advice, in translating the lessons of Galkayo's past into the architecture of its future.

About the Kenadid Institute for Policy & Development

The Kenadid Institute for Policy & Development (KIPD) is an independent, non-partisan Somali policy research institution headquartered in Garowe, Puntland, with a Somalia-wide mandate. KIPD conducts research and analysis on governance, peacebuilding, social cohesion, and development, and supports evidence-based dialogue among Somali institutions, communities, and their partners. The views expressed in this article are institutional analyses intended to inform public debate and do not represent the position of any government, administration, or community. Correspondence: kenadidinstitute@gmail.com | www.kenadid.org

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