

MUDUG CONFLICT

Analysis and Solutions

**Breaking the Cycle: Addressing the Leelkase–Sa’ad Clan Conflict
for Sustainable Peace in Mudug, Somali**

Dated: 28, June, 2025

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Executive Summary

The Mudug region of central Somalia, particularly the divided city of Galkayo, represents a critical fault line in the country's complex political and social landscape. For decades, it has been the epicenter of a protracted and cyclical conflict between the Leelkase, a sub-clan of the Darod clan family, and the Sa'ad, a sub-clan of the Habar Gidir/Hawiye clan family. This conflict, while rooted in historical competition over scarce pastoral resources, has been systematically manipulated and militarized by state actors and has become institutionalized within Somalia's federal structure. Recent escalations in 2024 and 2025 have underscored the devastating human cost of this recurring violence, resulting in hundreds of casualties, the displacement of tens of thousands, and the collapse of local economies and social structures.

This report argues that the Leelkase-Sa'ad conflict is a protracted social conflict, locked in a self-perpetuating cycle by the convergence of four key drivers: acute resource scarcity, political manipulation and contested governance, a weak rule of law that enables a culture of impunity and revenge killings, and the proliferation of arms that fuels a persistent security dilemma. Past peace initiatives, while achieving temporary ceasefires, have consistently failed to produce sustainable peace because they have treated these drivers in isolation, focusing on elite-level pacts without addressing the underlying structural issues or building credible enforcement mechanisms. The 1993 Mudug Peace Agreement, for example, successfully de-escalated the civil war but created a fragile truce that has since collapsed multiple times. Similarly, state-level agreements between Puntland and Galmudug have proven ineffective at the community level.

Breaking this entrenched cycle of violence requires a fundamental shift in approach, moving away from reactive, event-driven peacemaking towards a proactive, long-term, and integrated peacebuilding strategy. This report proposes a comprehensive, multi-track framework designed to address the conflict's interconnected drivers simultaneously.

- **Track 1: Foundational Governance and Security Reform.** This track focuses on establishing a legitimate and inclusive governance framework for the Mudug region. Key recommendations include ensuring equitable representation for both clans in regional administrations, creating a truly integrated and professional joint security force with a unified command structure, and initiating a credible Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program for clan militias. A critical component is the political resolution of Galkayo's status, potentially through its designation as a special federal territory with a joint administration, to de-escalate the zero-sum competition for its control.

- **Track 2: Economic Interdependence and Resource Management.** This track aims to transform the primary source of conflict—resource competition—into a catalyst for cooperation. Recommendations include establishing a co-managed "Mudug Resource Development Fund" to invest in shared infrastructure such as boreholes, dams, and veterinary clinics, thereby creating tangible peace dividends. This must be paired with a transparent, community-led mechanism for mapping and codifying traditional grazing routes and water access rights, enforced by the joint security force.
- **Track 3: Social Reconciliation and Transitional Justice.** This track addresses the deep-seated historical grievances and the cycle of revenge. It advocates for a hybrid justice model that strengthens both traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and formal courts to end the culture of impunity for killings. This includes supporting ongoing, facilitated community dialogues focused on trauma healing and developing a shared historical narrative, while ensuring the formal inclusion and empowerment of women and youth, who are disproportionately affected by the conflict but often excluded from peace processes.

These three tracks are not a menu of options but an interdependent and indivisible package. Security reform is unsustainable without economic alternatives for militiamen; resource-sharing agreements are meaningless without a trusted justice system to enforce them; and political deals will inevitably collapse without the social reconciliation needed to rebuild trust. The successful implementation of this holistic strategy requires a sustained and synchronized commitment from the Federal Government of Somalia, the administrations of Puntland and Galmudug, clan leaders, civil society, and the international community to finally break the cycle of violence and build a foundation for sustainable peace in Mudug.

Introduction

The Mudug region of central Somalia symbolizes the nation's enduring challenges. This semi-arid landscape is marked by survival linked to clan identity and political ambition. For decades, it has served as critical fault line in Somali politics, where competition for scarce resources is tied to the struggle for power and influence.¹ The city of Galkayo, the regional capital, is physically and politically divided, reflecting the deep divisions in Mudug and Somalia. Here, the conflict between the Leelkase and the Sa'ad, has resulted in significant consequences, making the region a microcosm of the broader issues of state-building, federalism, and reconciliation in a post-conflict society.

The main parties in this conflict are the Leelkase, a sub-clan of the Darod, and the Sa'ad, a sub-clan of the Habar Gidir from the Hawiye clan. Their rivalry is rooted in the political structures that arose after the collapse of the Somali state. The Leelkase are aligned with the Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), the first armed opposition to the Siyaad Barre regime, and by extension, the modern Puntland State of Somalia, which controls North Galkayo.¹ In contrast, the Sa'ad were key supporters of the United Somali Congress (USC), which ousted Barre from Mogadishu, and are integral to the Galmudug State administration, which governs South Galkayo.¹ This rivalry has evolved into a de facto border dispute between two of Somalia's federal member states, escalating the stakes from control over resources to issues of regional sovereignty and national political power.

This report posits that the Leelkase-Sa'ad conflict is a protracted social conflict, drive by resource scarcity, cynical political manipulation, weak rule of law, and historical grievances. Decades of peace initiatives have failed to achieve a lasting resolution, focusing on temporary ceasefires rather than addressing structural drivers of violence. Breaking this cycle requires a shift from event-driven peacemaking to a holistic, multi-track peacebuilding strategy that address the interconnected political, economic, security, and social dimensions of the conflict. Only through a sustained and integrated approach can the communities of Mudug escape the legacy of violence and build a stable future.

Section 1: The Genesis of a Protracted Conflict: Historical Roots and Political Context

The animosity between the Leelkase and Sa'ad clans in Mudug is not a timeless feud, but a modern political conflict with a distinct of historical phases. This conflict has been significantly shaped by actions of colonial and post-colonial state authorities. Understanding its genesis requires tracing its roots from the arbitrary lines drawn on colonial maps to the deliberate manipulation by an authoritarian regime, and its institutionalization within Somalia's contemporary federal structure. The conflict's resilience lies in its ability to adapt to changing political landscapes, with each era adding new layers of grievance and complexity.

1.1 The Colonial Legacy and Pre-Barre Dynamics

The seeds of the modern territorial dispute in Mudug were sown during the Italian colonial period. The Italian Colonial Administration intervened in inter-clan disputes over land and water to manage the pastoralist populations.. A pivotal moment came in 1932 with the establishment of the "Tomaselli line," intended to delineate the traditional territories of the Darood and Hawiye clans in the region.¹ While conceived as a conflict resolution mechanism, this act had profound consequences. By drawing a formal line on a map, the colonial administration transformed fluid, customary land-use arrangements into rigid, politicized boundaries. This was particularly consequential for Galkayo, which sat astride this new division. The Darood clans, including the Leelkase, came to view the city as exclusively theirs based on this ruling, a claim contested by the Hawiye, particularly the Sa'ad, who also had a historical presence in the area.¹

The short-lived civilian governments that ruled Somalia from independence in 1960 until the 1969 military coup inherited colonial-era tensions. While these governments sought to consolidate established borders, they also encouraged coexistence between clans.¹ During this period, forms of a multi-clan urban culture began to emerge in centers like Galkayo, where modern education and commerce started to weaken kinship dynamics.¹ However, these efforts at nation-building were insufficient to resolve underlying disputes over territory and political dominance. The unresolved claims over Galkayo and the surrounding pastoral lands remained a potent source of friction, a vulnerability that would be exploited in the decades to come.

1.2 The Siyaad Barre Regime (1969-1991): The State as a Conflict Perpetuator

The military coup led by Siyaad Barre in 1969 marked a turning point for inter-clan relations in Mudug and across Somalia. While publicly denouncing "clanism" as a social evil incompatible with his "scientific socialism," Barre's regime manipulated clan differences as a strategy for political survival.¹ The Mudug region became a primary site for this policy. The regime actively exploited the traditional rivalry between local clans over scarce grazing and water resources, transforming manageable disputes into militarized confrontations.

The Majerteen clan, a prominent Darod clan related to the Leelkase, was among the first to experience the regime's brutality. Following a failed coup attempt in 1978, the Barre government unleashed collective punishment against the Majerteen. Military officials, civil servants, and prominent business figures were subjected to intimidation, arrest, torture, and execution.¹ The government enforced a decree prohibiting any Majerteen from holding a position of power in Mudug.¹ This persecution directly led to the formation of the Ethiopian-based Somali Salvation Democratic Front (SSDF), Somalia's first armed opposition group, in 1978. With the SSDF's emergence, Mudug became a full-blown "theatre of war" from 1978 onwards, long before the complete collapse of the Somali state.

The regime's response to the SSDF insurgency was merciless. It meted out brutal reprisals against the civilians suspected of supporting the guerrillas, including livestock raids and destruction of key water sources, such as dynamiting community berkedes (underground water tanks).¹ This strategy aimed to cripple the pastoral economy that sustained the opposition. Simultaneously, the regime armed and supported rival clans, including elements of the Hawiye, to fight against the SSDF and its supporters. This state-sponsored violence fuelled the conflict, ensuring that local disputes were continuously stoked by political intrigue and military support from the central government.¹ By the time the Barre regime fell in 1991, the social fabric of Mudug had been shredded, and the conflict between the Hawiye and Darood clans had become deeply militarized and imbued with a bitter legacy of state-sponsored violence.

1.3 The Civil War and the 1993 Mudug Peace Agreement

The collapse of the Siyaad Barre regime in January 1991 did not bring peace to Mudug. Instead, it unleashed the clan-based militias that the regime had cultivated. Following the fall of Mogadishu to the United Somali Congress (USC), the Habar Gidir militia, a core component of the USC, intensified its military campaign to gain control over Galkayo and the surrounding areas.¹ Many Darood viewed this campaign as part of a broader scheme to extend Hawiye influence throughout Somalia.¹ The result was some of the most ferocious fighting of the Somali civil war.

Between February 1991 and June 1993, Galkayo became a ghost town. The city twice changed hands between the SSDF and USC forces and was severely devastated. It was systematically ransacked by marauding freelance bandits and armed militias loosely associated with the rival clans.¹ This period created massive waves of displacement, with Majerteen and other Darood clans fleeing north and Hawiye clans fleeing south, leaving the city practically deserted.¹ The conflict degenerated into a brutal war of attrition, generating immense animosity and leaving deep scars on the survivors.

After more than two years of sporadic combat, a pivotal moment of local agency emerged. In June 1993, a peace deal was signed in Mogadishu by clan elders and political figures from the SSDF (Majerteen/Darood), the Somali National Democratic Union (SNDU, the Leelkase and Awrtable/Darood), and the USC-SNA (Habar Gidir/Hawiye).¹ This agreement was a landmark achievement, representing a bottom-up effort to halt the bloodshed. It established a ceasefire and allowed displaced residents to return to their quarters in Galkayo.

However, the 1993 Mudug Peace Agreement was ultimately a limited success. While it stopped large-scale fighting and allowed the city's re-inhabitation, it was primarily a conflict management tool, not a resolution mechanism. It created an "uneasy truce" based on the physical separation of the clans and the peacekeeping role of their elders, but it failed to address the fundamental root causes of the conflict: the contested ownership of Galkayo, the unresolved claims over land and water, and the deep-seated political grievances.¹ The peace process stalled after this ceasefire, leaving unresolved issues that continued to fuel instability and violence, setting the stage for the next phase of the conflict.

1.4 The Federalism Paradox: Puntland, Galmudug, and the Hardening of the Fault Line

The political landscape of Somalia transformed in the late 1990s and 2000s with the advent of federalism. This process, intended as a solution to the predatory centralization of the Barre era, inadvertently created a new and more rigid structure for the Leelkase-Sa'ad conflict to persist. The "bottom-up" formation of the Puntland State of Somalia in 1998, with the SSDF as its core, formalized Darod control over Northeast Somalia, including North Mudug.¹ This was followed by the more contested and fragmented formation of the Galmudug State, which consolidated the authority of the Habar Gidir/Hawiye clans in the central regions, including South Mudug.

This "Federalism Paradox" significantly impacted the conflict dynamic. Galkayo shifted from a contested city to a de facto 'international border' town between two federal member states, each with its own administration, security forces, and political ambitions.¹ This institutionalization of the clan-based political divide escalated the conflict. Disputes became entangled in larger struggles for regional political legitimacy, administrative dominance, and representation at the federal level.

The formation of Galmudug was particularly fraught and highlighted these tensions. When the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) pushed for the merger of various clan-based administrations in the central regions in 2014, Puntland vehemently objected,

arguing that the inclusion of North Mudug in the new state infringed upon its jurisdiction.¹ This led to a suspension of cooperation between Puntland and the FGS, demonstrating how the local dispute had escalated into a major national political crisis.¹ Subsequent power-sharing agreements within Galmudug, such as the 2017 deal that brought the moderate Islamist group Ahlu Sunna Waljama'a (ASWJ) into the administration, were often undermined by the larger political deadlock between the FGS and the federal member states.¹ Each political maneuver, from the selection of a state capital to the appointment of ministers, was viewed through the lens of the Leelkase-Sa'ad (and by extension, Puntland-Galmudug) rivalry. Federalism, therefore, did not resolve the conflict but rather formalised and structured it, hardening the fault line and complicating resolution.

Section 2: Anatomy of the Conflict Cycle: Key Drivers and Perpetuating Factors

The Leelkase-Sa'ad conflict is driven by contemporary factors drivers that create a cycle of violence. These include resource scarcity, political power struggles, a culture of impunity, and a pervasive security dilemma. A dispute over a water well can escalate into a political confrontation and revenge killing, justifying further arming of militias and making future political compromise nearly impossible. Understanding this vicious cycle is essential for designing effective interventions.

2.1 The Struggle for Scarce Resources

The conflict in Mudug fundamentally revolves around survival in a harsh, semi-arid environment. The economy is based on pastoralism, making access to water and grazing land the most critical for wealth, and life.¹ The region has the highest per capita livestock population in Somalia, yet it suffers from low and erratic rainfall and a lack of perennial water sources.¹ This inherent scarcity creates a zero-sum competition that forms the bedrock of inter-clan tension.

Disputes frequently erupt over the ownership and use of vital resources. The construction of private or communal water reservoirs, known as berkedes, is often a major trigger for conflict. While a practical measure for water conservation, the digging of a berked is perceived by rival clans as a permanent claim to territory, an attempt to alter traditional land-use patterns and establish exclusive control over a grazing area.¹ Similarly, recent clashes in 2024 were explicitly linked to disputes over land ownership and the construction of water dams, which were seen as a direct challenge to the resource access of the opposing clan.

Climate change has intensified competition, leading to more frequent and severe droughts. Pastoralists often migrate into territories traditionally used by other clans, exacerbating tensions. For example, In 2024 Sa'ad militias ventured into Leelkase areas seeking pasture, resulting in a deadly confrontation. In this context, resource competition is an existential issue, fueling the conflict cycle.

2.2 Political Power and Contested Governance

In Mudug, the struggle for resources is intertwined with the struggle for political power. Control over administrative structures translates into the ability to influence land allocation, security forces, and development resources, making political competition a high-stakes game. Both clans exploit these dynamics, mobilizing militias to consolidate power and undermine rivals.

Election periods are particularly volatile, as they intensify the competition for political representation. The process of state formation in Galmudug has been repeatedly marred by accusations of manipulation and exclusion. Negotiations have often sidelined less dominant clans, fueling resentment and creating a fertile ground for conflict.¹ Groups that feel politically marginalized may resort to violence to assert their presence or counter perceived injustices.¹ The entire state-building process, from the selection of delegates for reconciliation conferences to the election of the president, is viewed through the prism of the Leelkase-Sa'ad rivalry, turning what should be exercises in governance into triggers for conflict.

Federalism has complicated this dynamic by formalizing political roles at the subnational level, creating new arenas for clan competition.¹ Political aspirants from both sides assert competing claims over leadership positions and administrative control, even at the district level, further fueling tensions.¹ This intertwining of resource competition with political ambition means that a dispute over a grazing area can swiftly be framed as a political challenge, transforming local issue into broader crisis.

2.3 The Engine of Retaliation: Impunity and Revenge Killings

The cycle of revenge killings, known in Somali as *aar* perpetuates the conflict. In a context where justice systems are weak, violence becomes the primary means of settling scores. A killing is viewed as an assault on the victim's clan, compelling retribution against the perpetrator's clan to restore balance.

This tit-for-tat dynamic creates a deadly and escalatory logic. The 2024 clashes provide a chillingly clear case study of this process in action. The violence erupted following a cycle

of retaliatory killings: "initially, a Sa'ad clan member killed a Leelkase individual, prompting the Leelkase to kill four Sa'ad members in revenge. This escalated into a larger conflict when the Sa'ad, reinforced by allies from Bandiiradley, launched an offensive against the Leelkase".¹ This sequence demonstrates how a single act of violence can rapidly spiral into a full-blown clan war, with each side feeling justified in its actions.

The culture of impunity is the critical factor that allows this cycle to continue unbroken. The absence of a credible and impartial justice system means that perpetrators of violence are rarely held accountable. The regional administration in North Mudug, as described in 1998, was "virtually bankrupt" and "unable to administer the town and restore civic rule," relying almost entirely on clan elders to manage disputes.¹ While elders can mediate ceasefires and arrange for the payment of blood money (diya), they often lack the capacity to enforce their rulings against heavily armed militias or to prosecute individuals for murder. This systemic failure of justice ensures that grievances fester and that the desire for revenge remains a potent and ever-present motivator for future violence.

2.4 The Security Dilemma: Proliferation of Arms and Clan Militias

The final component of the conflict cycle is a classic security dilemma, fueled by the widespread proliferation of weapons and the central role of clan militias. In the absence of a trusted, effective, and impartial state security apparatus, each clan feels compelled to arm itself for self-defense.¹ However, the act of one clan arming itself is perceived as an offensive threat by its rivals, who then feel they must arm themselves further to maintain security. This escalatory spiral ensures that the region remains awash with weapons and that any minor dispute has the potential to become a deadly military confrontation.

Clan militias are not just defensive forces; they are instruments of political and economic influence, used to secure territorial control, protect trade routes, and enforce the will of clan elites.¹ These militias range from loosely organized groups of fighters mobilized during a crisis to more established armed wings with political backing.¹ The failure to demobilize these militias and reintegrate them into society has been a persistent challenge since the 1993 peace agreement and remains a critical obstacle to any lasting peace.

The role of formal state security forces often exacerbates this dilemma rather than resolving it. The Somali National Army (SNA) and regional forces are frequently perceived as being aligned along clan lines, blurring the distinction between state and clan militias. During the 2024 clashes, there were credible allegations that the SNA may have supported the Sa'ad side by providing weapons and personnel.¹ Such partisan

involvement, whether real or perceived, is catastrophic for peace efforts. It completely erodes public trust in formal institutions, reinforces the belief that security can only be guaranteed by one's own clan militia, and validates the ongoing cycle of armament and violence.

Section 3: Contemporary Dynamics and Humanitarian Consequences (2020-2025)

The drivers of conflict—resource scarcity, political ambition, and historical grievance—are manifesting brutally for the people of Mudug. From 2020 to 2025, clashes have escalated in frequency and intensity, resulting in significant humanitarian consequences. The violence has claimed hundreds of lives triggering mass displacement, crippled local economies, and shredded the social fabric of communities. The resulting humanitarian crisis has become a driver of conflict, as displaced populations exert pressure on resources in new areas, sowing the seeds for future disputes.

3.1 Analysis of Recent Escalations (2024-2025)

In 2024 and 2025, the Leelkase–Sa’ad conflict resurged, demonstrating the fragility of previous peace agreements. Clashes erupted in western Mudug region, particularly in the rural areas of Dalsan and Jiicboor, near the district of Galdogob.¹ The scale of this violence was alarming. In one series of clashes, at least 20 fatalities were reported on both sides, with numerous others sustaining injuries.¹ Across Somalia, the broader trend of escalating clan violence resulted in over 600 deaths and 168 reported incidents between January 2024 and February 2025, a sharp increase from 90 incidents in 2023.

A worrying development was the conflict's spillover into the capital, Galkayo. In January 2025, a gunfight erupted in the Garsoor neighborhood between Leelkase and Sa’ad militias, reportedly linked to the ongoing clashes in western Mudug. This incident, resulted in casualties and signaled a dangerous escalation, highlighting the failure of containment efforts and the potential for the conflict to destabilize a major urban center that houses populations from both clans.¹ Security forces from both the Puntland and Galmudug administrations were forced to intervene to impose a ceasefire, highlighting the reactive nature of security responses.

3.2 The Human Toll: Displacement and Protection Crisis

The most immediate and widespread humanitarian consequence of the conflict is forced displacement. The 2024 clashes alone uprooted thousands of families. In the Jiicboor area, over 5,820 individuals were displaced, while clashes in western Mudug in June 2024

displaced over 5,000 people initially, followed by another 2,900 in a subsequent wave.¹ These figures are part of a national crisis, with clan conflicts displacing nearly 250,000 people across Somalia since January 2024.

Unlike temporary displacement caused by floods or drought, conflict-driven displacement in Mudug is often prolonged, if not permanent. Families are unable to return to their homes due to persistent security fears, the complete destruction of their houses and villages, and the absence of any financial or institutional support for rebuilding.¹ In some instances, territorial boundaries harden after a conflict, and new settlements emerge, effectively erasing the possibility of return for the displaced group.¹ These uprooted populations are compelled to seek refuge in overcrowded camps or makeshift shelters, often in remote areas where access to basic services like healthcare, clean water, and sanitation is severely limited or nonexistent.

This displacement creates a severe protection crisis, particularly for the most vulnerable. Women and children, who constitute over 60% of the displaced population, face heightened risks. Women and girls are exposed to increased rates of sexual and gender-based violence, early and forced marriage, and domestic abuse. Boys become more vulnerable to forced recruitment by clan militias or other armed groups.¹ The violence frequently leads to family separation, leaving children unaccompanied and highly susceptible to exploitation, abuse, and neglect. The trauma of witnessing violence and losing loved ones, combined with the instability of life in displacement, exposes children to severe psychosocial distress and disrupts their education, jeopardizing their future prospects.

3.3 Socio-Economic Collapse

The conflict inflicts a devastating blow on the already fragile economy of the Mudug region. The violence directly disrupts the two primary pillars of the local livelihood system: pastoralism and trade. For pastoralist communities, clashes lead to the loss of critical assets. Livestock are killed, stolen, or lost as families flee, and access to essential grazing routes and water points is cut off.¹ Approximately 30% of those displaced by clan clashes in August 2024 were livestock herders who fled with their animals, underscoring the profound disruption to this way of life.¹

The conflict also paralyzes trade and destroys critical economic infrastructure. In July 2024, clashes in Luuq town, Jubaland – a region also affected by clan violence – saw the destruction of key markets, with approximately 200 businesses burned down.¹ This pattern is mirrored in Mudug, where violence disrupts trade routes and leads to the

destruction of markets and storage facilities. This disruption has a direct impact on food security. In Galmudug, the prices of essential commodities like rice, pasta, and sugar increased by up to 4% in June 2024 due to supply shortages caused by the conflict.¹ In more acutely affected areas, food prices surged by an estimated 15-20% and have remained high, diminishing the purchasing power of vulnerable households and pushing them deeper into food insecurity.

Furthermore, the violence results in the widespread destruction of critical infrastructure. Homes, farms, water facilities, schools, and health clinics are often damaged or destroyed, leaving communities without shelter and essential services.¹ This not only deepens the immediate humanitarian crisis but also cripples any prospect of long-term development. The cyclical nature of the violence ensures that communities remain trapped in a state of perpetual crisis, unable to recover or rebuild before the next wave of fighting erupts.

Section 4: A History of Peace-making: Assessing Past and Present Initiatives

The Leelkase-Sa'ad conflict is marked by numerous failed peace agreements. For over three decades, clan elders, regional administrations, the federal government, and international organizations have attempted to quell the violence. While these initiatives have brokered temporary ceasefires, they have failed to achieve sustainable peace. A critical assessment reveals a pattern: a focus on elite-level peacemaking neglects grassroots peacebuilding, and there are no credible mechanisms to enforce agreements on the ground. This disconnect results in pacts signed by leaders in capital cities having little influence over the armed actors in the contested pasturelands of Mudug.

4.1 Chronology of Peace Efforts

The history of peacemaking in Mudug is long and complex, evolving from localized, elder-led dialogues to more formalized, state-level interventions. The following table provides a chronological overview and analysis of the most significant initiatives, highlighting their actors, provisions, and ultimate effectiveness. This synthesis reveals a clear trend from reactive de-escalation towards more comprehensive, though still challenged, peacebuilding efforts.

- June 1993 Mudug Peace Agreement | SSDF, SNDU, USC-SNA Clan Elders | Ceasefire, return of residents to Galkayo, formation of joint elder committees. | Partially Effective: Stopped large-scale fighting and allowed Galkayo to be re-inhabited. Failure: Did not address root causes (land, power); created a fragile "uneasy truce" that has repeatedly broken down.

- 2016 Galkayo Peace Agreement | Puntland & Galmudug Administrations | Reduce hostilities between administrations, establish buffer zones. | Ineffective: An elite pact that failed to trickle down. Addressed symptoms (fighting) not the underlying clan tensions over resources and political control.
- 2020 Bandiiradley Reconciliation Conference | Sa'ad & Leelkase Elders, Interpeace | 9-point agreement, compensation ("orphan rearing") payments, establishment of a joint religious council for justice. | Notably Successful (in the short-term): A community-driven process that de-escalated a 40-year conflict through traditional mechanisms. Challenge: Sustainability depends on the enforcement capacity of the new Galmudug state, which remains weak.
- 2024 Joint Peace Efforts | Puntland & Galmudug Administrations, Clan Elders | Joint ministerial committees, deployment of combined peacekeeping forces, calls for unconditional ceasefire. | Reactive, not Proactive: Demonstrates improved inter-state cooperation but is a response to major violence, not a preventative measure. Success is contingent

4.2 Analysis of Failures: The Limits of Elite Pacts and Weak Enforcement

The primary reason for the repeated failure of peace initiatives in Mudug is their over-reliance on elite-driven pacts that lack both community buy-in and credible enforcement mechanisms. Agreements like the 2016 Galkayo Peace Accord were negotiated and signed by the political leadership of Puntland and Galmudug, but they were largely ignored by the clan militias on the ground.¹ These top-down approaches treat the conflict as a political problem between administrations, failing to address the deep-seated grievances at the community level that actually fuel the violence. The leaders who sign these deals often lack the political will or the coercive capacity to impose them on their own constituents, especially when powerful militia commanders or traditional elders feel their interests have been sidelined.

The single greatest obstacle to implementing any peace deal is the challenge of security. As long as both clans maintain heavily armed militias, any agreement remains voluntary and subject to the whims of armed actors. No way has yet been found to "demobilise the armed militiamen and reintegrate them into the society to become law-abiding and productive citizens".¹ The lack of a neutral, professional security force capable of enforcing a ceasefire and protecting all communities creates a vacuum that is filled by partisan clan militias. The deployment of "combined peacekeeping forces" in 2024, drawn

from both Puntland and Galmudug, is a positive step towards cooperation, but their effectiveness is limited as long as they are perceived as being composed of the very clans they are meant to separate.¹ Without a comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) program, any peace agreement is built on a foundation of sand.

4.3 The Indispensable Role of Local Actors

Despite the limitations of past efforts, the history of peacemaking in Mudug also reveals the indispensable role of local actors. No peace process can hope to succeed without the central involvement of traditional clan elders. They are the custodians of customary law (Xeer) and enjoy a high degree of respect and legitimacy that state institutions often lack.¹ The 1993 agreement, which ended the most brutal phase of the civil war in Galkayo, was brokered by elders.¹ The more recent 2020 Bandiiradley conference, which successfully de-escalated a 40-year-old conflict between the two clans, was a community-driven process facilitated by an international NGO (Interpeace) but led by the elders themselves.¹ This initiative's initial success lay in its use of culturally resonant mechanisms, such as the payment of compensation framed as "orphan rearing" funds, and the establishment of a joint religious council to dispense justice.

Beyond the elders, other elements of civil society have played a crucial role. Women, while often excluded from formal decision-making due to the patriarchal nature of Somali society, have consistently acted as peacemakers through their unique positions as mothers and wives, bridging clan divides.¹ Youth groups, professionals, and local NGOs have also engaged in peace advocacy, dialogue facilitation, and denouncing violence.¹ These bottom-up initiatives are vital for building the social trust and reconciliation that must underpin any political settlement. The key failure of past strategies has been the inability to effectively link these legitimate, community-level processes with the top-down authority and resources of the state. Sustainable peace will only be possible when the legitimacy of the elders is combined with the enforcement capacity of a reformed and trusted state.

Section 5: A Multi-Track Strategy for Sustainable Peace

The cyclical nature of the Leelkase–Sa’ad conflict, driven by a complex system of interconnected factors, demands a solution that is equally systemic and integrated. Piecemeal interventions—digging a well without addressing political exclusion, or signing a ceasefire without disarming militias—have proven insufficient. Breaking the cycle requires a holistic, multi-track strategy that simultaneously addresses the political, security, economic, and social dimensions of the conflict. The following recommendations are not a menu of options from which to choose, but an interdependent package.

The success of each track is contingent upon progress in the others. This framework aims to move beyond reactive peacemaking to proactive, long-term peacebuilding, creating a reinforcing cycle of stability and development to replace the current cycle of violence and despair.

5.1 Track 1: Foundational Governance and Security Reform

The foundation of any sustainable peace in Mudug must be a legitimate and effective governance and security architecture that is trusted by all communities. This requires moving beyond simplistic power-sharing formulas to create genuinely inclusive institutions and a neutral security apparatus capable of holding the monopoly on the legitimate use of force.

- **Inclusive Governance and the Status of Galkayo:** The current administrative structures in Mudug perpetuate conflict by reinforcing clan divisions. A crucial first step is to ensure equitable representation for both Leelkase and Sa'ad clans in the Mudug regional administration and the broader Galmudug state government. This must go beyond simply allocating a certain number of cabinet posts; it requires establishing joint decision-making bodies for critical issues like land management, resource allocation, and security oversight.¹ To de-escalate the zero-sum competition for Galkayo, its political status must be resolved. A viable long-term solution would be its designation as a special federal territory with a joint administration co-managed by Puntland and Galmudug, removing it as a source of inter-state rivalry.¹
- **Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR):** The current security landscape, dominated by clan militias and partisan state forces, is a primary driver of the conflict. A radical overhaul is needed to create a truly integrated, professional security force for the Mudug region. This force should recruit from all clans but operate under a unified, professional command structure that is independent of clan elders and political figures.¹ The deployment of such a force must be paired with a credible and well-resourced DDR program for existing clan militias. This program must offer viable economic alternatives, such as vocational training and small business grants, to incentivize disarmament and prevent militiamen from becoming spoilers.¹ Without disarming the clan militias, any political agreement will remain unenforceable.

5.2 Track 2: Economic Interdependence and Resource Management

Competition over scarce resources is the flashpoint for much of the violence in Mudug. This track aims to transform this primary source of conflict into a catalyst for cooperation by creating shared economic interests and transparent management systems.

- **Joint Infrastructure Investment and Peace Dividends:** A key recommendation is the establishment of a "Mudug Resource Development Fund," to be co-managed by a board of trusted representatives from both the Leelkase and Sa'ad communities, with technical and financial support from the Federal Government and international partners. This fund would invest in shared infrastructure projects identified by the communities themselves, such as the strategic digging of new boreholes, the construction of dams and water catchments (berkeds), and the establishment of veterinary clinics and livestock markets.¹ By creating shared economic assets, this initiative would generate tangible peace dividends, making cooperation more profitable than conflict and fostering economic interdependence that transcends clan lines.

- **Transparent Resource-Sharing Mechanisms:** To prevent disputes over the use of these new and existing resources, a formal and binding agreement on resource management is essential. This can be achieved by creating a joint council composed of respected clan elders and technical experts (e.g., hydrologists, rangeland specialists). This council's mandate would be to map and formally codify traditional grazing routes and seasonal water access rights, creating a clear and mutually accepted framework for resource use.¹ This local agreement must then be given legal standing and be enforced by the reformed, neutral joint security force, ensuring that violations have consequences.

5.3 Track 3: Social Reconciliation and Transitional Justice

Political pacts and economic projects cannot hold without addressing the deep-seated mistrust, historical grievances, and cycles of revenge that poison inter-communal relations. This track focuses on rebuilding the social fabric of Mudug through justice, dialogue, and inclusion.

- **Strengthening Justice and Ending Impunity:** The culture of impunity for revenge killings is a primary engine of the conflict cycle. A hybrid justice model is needed to address this. This would involve formally empowering and resourcing the joint religious council established at the 2020 Bandiiradley conference to adjudicate inter-clan disputes according to Islamic Sharia and customary law, which holds high legitimacy at the local level.¹ Simultaneously, the formal court system must be strengthened and capacitated to impartially investigate and prosecute serious crimes like murder, regardless of the perpetrator's clan affiliation. This dual approach would provide accessible, legitimate justice for local disputes while establishing a clear deterrent against the cycle of revenge killings.¹

- **Community-Led Dialogue and Trauma Healing:** Reconciliation requires more than just the settlement of disputes; it requires a process of social and psychological

healing. This can be fostered through sustained, professionally facilitated dialogues at the community level. These forums should provide safe spaces for communities to address past grievances, acknowledge the suffering on all sides, and work towards developing a shared historical narrative that recognizes past injustices without justifying future violence.¹ These initiatives should also incorporate trauma healing programs, particularly for youth and other groups heavily affected by decades of violence.

● **Empowering Women and Youth in Peace Processes:** Women and youth are disproportionately affected by the conflict but are systematically excluded from formal peace negotiations.¹ This is a critical failure that must be rectified. Sustainable peace requires the inclusion of all segments of society. Specific policies and funding mechanisms must be established to ensure that women and youth have formal, guaranteed roles and a powerful voice in all reconciliation, governance, and security structures. Their unique perspectives and capacity for bridging divides are an untapped resource that is essential for breaking the cycle of conflict.

Section 6: Recommendations

To foster sustainable peace and break the cycle of conflict in the Mudug region, it is imperative that all stakeholders—including the Federal Government of Somalia, the administrations of Puntland and Galmudug, clan leaders, and the international community—commit to a series of concrete, integrated, and formally structured actions. The following recommendations are presented with the objective of establishing a robust framework for lasting stability.

6.1 Governance and Political Settlement

● **Formalize the Administrative Status of Galkayo:** It is recommended that the political status of Galkayo be definitively resolved to mitigate its role as a persistent conflict flashpoint. Viable options, which must be prioritized, include its designation as a special federal territory or the establishment of a joint administration co-managed by Puntland and Galmudug. Clarifying the city's administrative status is a foundational step toward de-escalating inter-state rivalry and enabling lasting peace for its residents.

● **Institute Inclusive and Meritocratic Governance:** Measures should be instituted to ensure equitable representation for all clans in regional and local administrations. This must transcend token appointments and involve creating joint decision-making bodies for critical issues such as land management and

security oversight. Furthermore, the selection of public officials must be reformed to be based on merit and qualifications, rather than solely on lineage, to build competent and effective administrative institutions that can command public trust.

- **Implement Democratic Local Elections:** To enhance the legitimacy of state and local authorities, a transition to democratic local council elections should be pursued. Such elections would empower citizens to choose their own leaders, provide much-needed civic education, and create more inclusive and representative local administrations.

6.2 Security Sector Reform and Rule of Law

- **Establish an Integrated Joint Security Force:** A unified, professional security force for the Mudug region must be established, recruiting from all clans but operating under a single, impartial command structure independent of clan politics. This is critical to replace the current patchwork of clan militias and partisan state forces that perpetuate the security dilemma.

- **Implement a Comprehensive Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) Program:** The establishment of a professional security force must be accompanied by a credible, well-resourced DDR program for existing clan militias. This program is essential for breaking the power of armed groups and must provide viable economic alternatives, such as vocational training, to prevent demobilized fighters from returning to violence.

- **Strengthen the Judiciary and End Impunity:** A hybrid justice model that strengthens both traditional and formal judicial systems must be established to end the culture of impunity that fuels revenge killings. This includes empowering elder-led councils to mediate disputes while capacitating formal courts to prosecute serious crimes. A clear shift from collective clan responsibility to individual accountability for criminal acts is a necessary component of this reform.

6.3 Economic Development and Resource Management

- **Create a Joint Resource Management Framework:** A formal, legally binding framework for the management of shared natural resources, particularly water and grazing land, must be developed. This should involve a joint council of elders and technical experts to map and codify traditional land-use rights, with enforcement carried out by the integrated security force.

- **Establish a "Peace Dividend" Fund for Shared Infrastructure:** A co-managed "Mudug Resource Development Fund" should be created to invest in shared economic infrastructure, such as boreholes, veterinary clinics, and markets. Such projects create tangible peace dividends, fostering economic interdependence and demonstrating that cooperation is more profitable than conflict.
- **Promote Livelihood Diversification:** To reduce dependency on contested pastoral resources, programs must be implemented to support the diversification of local economies. This includes support for small businesses, fisheries, and irrigated agriculture where feasible.

6.4 Social Reconciliation and Transitional Justice

- **Launch a Formal, Multi-level Dialogue Process:** A sustained and professionally facilitated dialogue process must be initiated at the community level. These forums should provide a safe and structured environment for clans to address historical grievances, acknowledge mutual suffering, and build trust.
- **Establish Mechanisms for Transitional Justice:** To address the deep-seated cycle of revenge, formal mechanisms for transitional justice are required. This should include support for culturally resonant practices, such as the payment of blood money (diya), while also building capacity for formal legal redress to ensure accountability for past atrocities.
- **Mandate the Inclusion of Women and Youth:** It is imperative to formally mandate the inclusion of women and youth in all peace, security, and governance processes. Their exclusion from decision-making is a critical failure. Specific policies and funding mechanisms must be established to ensure their active and meaningful participation, leveraging their unique capacity to bridge divides and build social cohesion.

Conclusion

The conflict between the Leelkase and Sa'ad clans in Somalia's Mudug region is not an intractable primordial feud but a systemic political and social problem, deeply entrenched by decades of state manipulation, resource competition, and a persistent security vacuum. The recurring cycles of violence are the predictable outcome of a system where political power is contested through armed clan militias, where scarce resources

are a zero-sum prize, and where a culture of impunity allows revenge to substitute for justice. Past peace initiatives, though well-intentioned, have consistently failed because they have applied piecemeal solutions to this complex, interconnected system. They have brokered ceasefires without building a security apparatus to enforce them, promoted political deals without fostering the social trust to sustain them, and addressed symptoms without resolving the underlying structural drivers of conflict.

Breaking this cycle requires a fundamental strategic shift. The analysis presented in this report leads to an unequivocal conclusion: a durable peace in Mudug can only be achieved through a comprehensive, multi-track strategy that addresses the political, security, economic, and social dimensions of the conflict simultaneously and in a synchronized manner. These tracks—foundational governance and security reform, economic interdependence and resource management, and social reconciliation and transitional justice—are not a menu of options but an indivisible and interdependent package. The failure to pursue them as a unified whole will only ensure the continuation of past failures.

This endeavor requires a level of political will and sustained commitment that has thus far been absent. It demands that the Federal Government of Somalia and the administrations of Puntland and Galmudug move beyond their rivalries to collaboratively invest in a shared, stable future for Mudug. It requires clan leaders to look beyond short-term gains and embrace compromises that serve the long-term interests of their communities. Finally, it calls upon the international community to shift its support from reactive crisis management and short-term humanitarian aid to a long-term, integrated peace-building strategy that provides the political leverage, technical expertise, and financial resources needed to implement this holistic framework. The path to peace in Mudug is arduous and complex, but it is not impossible. By addressing the root causes of the conflict with a coherent and sustained strategy, it is possible to finally break the cycle of violence and offer the people of Mudug a future defined not by conflict, but by stability, cooperation, and hope.

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MUDUG CONFLICT

Analysis and Solutions

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Dated: 28, June, 2025

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