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Abstract:

Purpose of the Study: This study examines how Somaliland has achieved durable peace and effective counter-terrorism despite lacking a Weberian monopoly on force. It explores how hybrid security governance, combining state institutions with clan elders, customary law, religious authorities, and local communities, provides a legitimate and sustainable alternative to conventional state-centred security models.

Methodology: The study employs a qualitative single-case study design using Somaliland as an instructive case. It relies on secondary data drawn from scholarly literature on state formation, hybrid political order, governance, and counter-terrorism.

Comparative analysis with south-central Somalia is used to identify governance mechanisms explaining contrasting security outcomes.

Findings: The findings demonstrate that Somaliland's relative peace and resilience against violent extremism result from a hybrid security governance system integrating customary institutions with formal state structures. Four mutually reinforcing mechanisms underpin this success: legitimacy derived from locally accepted authority, community-based early warning through local knowledge, customary dispute resolution that reduces grievances, and community-embedded policing that enhances cooperation between citizens and security agencies. Unlike conventional Weberian state-building approaches, the hybrid model prevents extremist groups from exploiting governance gaps by fostering public trust, ownership, and collective responsibility for security.

Conclusion: The study concludes that hybrid security governance represents a credible and context-sensitive counter-terrorism paradigm where Weberian state-building has proved ineffective. While not without limitations, Somaliland's experience demonstrates that security is more sustainably achieved through legitimate partnerships between state institutions and society than through centralized coercive authority alone.

Keywords: *hybrid governance; Weberian state; counter-terrorism; Somaliland; clan; customary authority; state formation; security*

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1. Introduction

There is a familiar account of how peace is built in places torn apart by war and threatened by armed extremists, and it runs along well-worn lines. A country, on this view, needs a strong central state. That state must have an army and a police force powerful enough to control its whole territory and to hold, in the famous phrase of the sociologist Max Weber, a monopoly on the legitimate use of force (Weber, 1919/1946). Where such a state is missing — where power is scattered among clans, militias, religious authorities and local strongmen — the task of the international community is to help build one: to train the soldiers, equip the police, write the laws, and fund the ministries, until a recognisable modern state stands on its own and can subdue the men of violence unaided. This is the model that has guided billions of dollars of international effort across the Horn of Africa and beyond. And in one place after another, it has disappointed.

Nowhere is the disappointment clearer than in Somalia. For more than three decades, since the collapse of the central government in 1991, an enormous international effort has gone into building a strong state in Mogadishu — backing transitional governments, funding a national army, deploying African Union forces, and pouring in aid. And yet south-central Somalia has remained insecure, and the violent extremist group Al Shabaab has not only survived but governed, taxed and adjudicated across large areas (Menkhaus, 2014). The conventional model, applied for a generation at great expense, has not produced the peace it promised.

A puzzle sits just to the northwest, however. There, a self-governing de facto state called Somaliland declared the restoration of its independence in 1991, after the collapse of the Somali state. For three decades it governed itself with no state recognising its independence; in December 2025 Israel became the first country to extend it bilateral recognition (Reuters, 2025; CNN, 2025), though it remains outside the United Nations and unrecognised by the African Union. In practice, it has functioned as a self-governing de facto state throughout. By the conventional measure it should be a textbook case of state failure: unrecognised, poor, lacking the full apparatus of a modern state, and without a Weberian monopoly on force, since real power is shared with clan elders and customary authorities. And yet Somaliland is, by the standards of its neighbourhood, remarkably peaceful and stable. It has held repeated elections, transferred power peacefully between rival parties, maintained its own currency and security forces, and — most striking of all for this article — has largely kept violent extremism at bay, denying Al Shabaab the foothold the group has found in the south. The place that looks, on paper, like failure has produced order; the place that has received the full conventional treatment has not.

This article takes that puzzle seriously and draws from it a broader lesson. The central argument is that Somaliland's success is not an accident, nor a mere by-product of luck or geography, but the result of a distinctive way of organising security — one that departs sharply from the Weberian model. Rather than trying to build a strong central state that would replace the inherited institutions



of clan and custom, Somaliland blended those institutions into the new state. Clan elders, customary law, religious authority and ordinary communities were not swept aside as obstacles to modern statehood; they were woven into the fabric of governance and made part of how order is produced. This article calls the resulting arrangement hybrid security governance, and it advances two claims about it. First, that it is not a halfway house or a temporary stage on the road to a ‘real’ Weberian state, but a coherent and legitimate model of order in its own right. Second, that it is, in particular, an effective approach to countering violent extremism — a counter-terrorism paradigm — because it produces security with society rather than imposing it from above, and in doing so denies extremist groups the openings they exploit elsewhere.

The distinction at the heart of the argument is between two ways of thinking about security. In the conventional, Weberian view, security is something a state delivers to a population: the state has the guns, the courts and the prisons, and the people are the recipients of the order it provides or the victims of its absence. In the hybrid view advanced here, security is something co-produced — made jointly by the state and by the non-state authorities and communities that hold legitimacy on the ground (Hagmann & Péclard, 2010). The clan elder who knows every family in his area, the religious figure whose word carries moral weight, the community that decides whether to shelter a stranger or report him: these are not obstacles to security but among its most important producers. A model that enlists them, this article contends, has resources against extremism that a purely state-centred model lacks — legitimacy that the population truly accepts, local knowledge that no outside force can match, and an early-warning system embedded in the social fabric itself.

The article is organised in the conventional scholarly sequence. The remainder of this introduction reviews the relevant literature and identifies the gap this study addresses (Section 1.1). Section 2 sets out the theoretical framework, explaining the Weberian model of the state and its limits and introducing the theory of hybrid political order that provides the article’s analytical lens. Section 3 describes the methodology — the research design, the choice of Somaliland as a case, the sources and evidence used, and the limitations of the approach. Section 4 presents the findings: how Somaliland built its order from 1991 onward, and the specific mechanisms through which its hybrid arrangement produces security. Section 5 offers the discussion, developing the counter-terrorism argument, drawing the contrast with south-central Somalia, confronting the main objections, and considering what does and does not travel to other settings. Section 6 concludes.

1.1 Literature review and the gap

Three bodies of scholarship bear on this study, and it is useful to situate the argument against each. The first is the literature on state failure and state-building, which for decades took the Weberian state as its benchmark and treated the absence of a central monopoly on force as a deficiency to be remedied through international intervention. This literature generated the dominant policy template applied across the Horn of Africa, and its disappointments — nowhere clearer than in south-central Somalia — are part of what motivates the search for an alternative. The second is



the literature on hybrid political order and the negotiation of statehood, developed by scholars who argued that order in many societies is produced not by the state alone but by a blend of state and non-state, modern and customary authority, and that such hybridity may be a durable and legitimate form of order rather than a symptom of failure. This literature provides the article's central concept. The third is the specific scholarship on Somaliland's state formation, a rich case literature documenting how the territory built peace through clan reconciliation and the incorporation of customary authority into the state.

What these literatures have largely left unconnected is the link between hybrid political order and counter-terrorism. The hybrid-order scholarship has concentrated on how such orders form and how legitimate they are, while the counter-terrorism literature has concentrated on military, intelligence and ideological measures, typically assuming a state-centred frame. The specific question of whether, and how, a hybrid governance arrangement functions as a counter-terrorism paradigm — denying violent extremists the conditions they exploit — has received less systematic attention than it deserves. This article addresses that gap. It takes the established insight that Somaliland is a hybrid political order and develops the underexplored claim that this same hybridity is the key to its comparative success against violent extremism. The contribution is to join the two conversations: to read hybrid governance not only as a route to legitimacy and stability but as a security paradigm with specific, identifiable counter-terrorism mechanisms.

The counter-terrorism literature on the Horn has concentrated on two registers. The first is hard security and external intervention — above all the long campaign of the African Union Mission against al-Shabaab (Williams, 2018); the second is the anatomy of the movement itself, its origins, ideology and organisation (Hansen, 2013). Alongside these sits a body of work on the drivers of radicalisation and on countering violent extremism (CVE), which locates extremist recruitment in state predation, marginalisation and the collapse of legitimate local authority (Menkhaus, 2004; Botha & Abdile, 2014). What this scholarship has theorised far less fully is the obverse proposition: that a locally legitimate, hybrid order can itself function as a preventive counter-terrorism mechanism — not by defeating extremists in the field, but by denying them the governance vacuum and the grievances on which they feed. The hybrid-political-order literature establishes the legitimacy and durability of such arrangements (Boege et al., 2008; Renders, 2012), and a parallel strand on 'everyday peace' shows how order is sustained from below (Mac Ginty, 2014); but neither has been brought systematically to bear on the counter-terrorism question. This article joins these literatures.

2. Theoretical Framework

To understand why Somaliland is so interesting, one must first understand the standard against which it is usually judged and found wanting, and the alternative lens through which this article proposes to read it. This section sets out the theoretical framework in two parts. It first explains



the Weberian model of the state — the dominant standard — and why it has struggled in settings like the Horn of Africa. It then introduces the theory of hybrid political order, which provides the analytical lens for the rest of the article. Together these supply the conceptual tools the analysis will use.

2.1 What the Weberian model says

Weber famously defined the state as the human community that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. Three ideas are compressed into that formulation. The first is monopoly: in a proper state, only the state may legitimately use force; private armies, militias and freelance enforcers are, by definition, illegitimate. The second is legitimacy: the state's use of force is accepted as rightful by the population, not merely feared. The third is territory: the state's authority covers a defined piece of ground, uniformly, up to its borders. A state that holds this monopoly can keep order, enforce its laws, collect its taxes and defend its people; a polity that lacks it is, on this view, not really a state at all, or at best a weak and failing one.

This model has enormous appeal and real virtues. It captures something true about the most stable and prosperous states in the world, where the government does hold a near-monopoly on force and most citizens accept its authority as legitimate. It offers a clear benchmark against which to measure other places. And it provides a ready prescription for those that fall short: help them build the institutions — army, police, courts, bureaucracy — that will let the central state extend its monopoly across the whole territory. For most of the twentieth century, and especially in the era of state-building interventions that followed the Cold War, this prescription became something close to global common sense. When a state collapsed or a country emerged from war, the international response was to rebuild or build the central state on the Weberian template.

2.2 Where the model runs into trouble

The difficulty is that across much of the world, and the Horn of Africa above all, no such central monopoly exists, and the effort to manufacture one has failed time and again. In these settings, force is not monopolised by a single state; it is dispersed among many actors — clans, customary authorities, religious networks, business interests, militias and local communities — each holding a share of real power and legitimacy. The Weberian model treats this dispersal as a problem to be solved, a deficiency to be overcome on the way to proper statehood. But what if the dispersal is not a temporary disorder but the durable, underlying reality — the way authority is actually organised, and will remain organised for the foreseeable future?

When the Weberian template is imposed on such a setting, it tends to fail in two related ways. The first is that the externally backed central state, lacking genuine legitimacy in the eyes of the population, becomes merely one more actor competing for power rather than the accepted authority above all others. Its army and police, however well-funded, are seen by many as the



instruments of a particular faction or clan, not as neutral guarantors of order. The second is that the inherited institutions — the clan elders, the customary courts, the religious authorities — which do hold legitimacy and do produce a kind of order, are sidelined, ignored or treated as rivals to be defeated. The result combines the weaknesses of both: a formal state that cannot deliver, and informal institutions that have been enfeebled or estranged. Much of the disappointment of state-building in fragile settings, this article suggests, flows from this fundamental mismatch between the Weberian template and the realities on the ground.

2.3 Hybrid political order: a different lens

Out of this disappointment a different way of thinking has grown, developed by scholars trying to make sense of places the Weberian model could not explain. They call it hybrid political order (Boege, Brown, Clements, & Nolan, 2008). The core idea is simple but powerful: in many societies, order is not produced by the state alone, nor by traditional institutions alone, but by a blend of the two — a hybrid in which state and non-state authorities, modern and customary institutions, formal and informal rules, all operate together and shape one another. The clan elder and the government official, the customary court and the statutory court, the religious authority and the constitution: in a hybrid order these are not separate worlds, one of them ‘real’ and the other a leftover, but interlocking parts of a single working system.

The crucial move that hybrid-order thinking makes is to stop treating non-state and customary institutions as obstacles or deficiencies. Instead it treats them as legitimate sources of order in their own right — often more legitimate, in the eyes of the population, than the formal state. The consequences of this reframing are far-reaching. If customary and religious authorities are producers of legitimate order, then the task is not to replace them but to work with them; not to build a state that monopolises force but to build an arrangement in which the various holders of authority cooperate to produce security and justice. Hybridity, on this view, is not a symptom of failure on the way to a Weberian state. It can be a stable and legitimate form of political order in its own right — and, this article will argue, in some respects a more robust one for the conditions of the Horn of Africa than the Weberian ideal it departs from.

A measure of balance is essential here, for hybrid order is not good in itself. The same blending that can produce legitimacy and stability can also entrench exclusions — of women, of minorities, of those outside the dominant clans — and can lock in the power of conservative authorities. Section 5.2 takes these dangers seriously. The claim here is not that hybridity is a cure-all, but that it is the actual terrain on which order is built in places like Somaliland, and that a model which embraces and shapes it deliberately is likely to do better than one which ignores or fights it. With this analytical lens established, the discussion turns to how Somaliland built its order.

2.4 The security cost of chasing the monopoly



Before turning to Somaliland, the specific security consequences of insisting on the Weberian monopoly where it does not exist deserve to be drawn out, for they lie at the centre of this article's argument. When an externally backed state sets out to monopolise force in a society where power is genuinely dispersed, it must, in effect, take power away from the clans, militias and customary authorities that currently hold it. This is not a neutral, technical exercise; it is a political struggle, and it makes enemies. The authorities being displaced may resist; the communities loyal to them may see the state's campaign not as the establishment of order but as the conquest of their group by a rival. The pursuit of the monopoly, that is to say, can itself generate conflict and grievance — the very conditions extremists exploit.

A deeper irony attends this dynamic. The Weberian state is meant to deliver security, yet the attempt to construct one in unsuitable conditions can actively diminish it, by undermining the existing, imperfect, but functioning sources of local order without putting anything legitimate in their place. The interval between the weakening of customary authority and the (often illusory) consolidation of the central state is a window of disorder — and it is precisely in such windows that violent groups establish themselves. A model that respects and builds on existing authority avoids opening this window at all. This is why the choice between the Weberian and hybrid approaches is not merely academic: it has direct and measurable consequences for whether extremism finds the openings it needs. The remainder of the article shows how Somaliland, by taking the hybrid path, largely avoided creating those openings.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This article adopts a qualitative, single-case study design. The case — Somaliland — is examined in depth in order to develop and illustrate a theoretical argument: that hybrid security governance can function as a counter-terrorism paradigm. The design is theory-building and interpretive rather than statistical: the aim is not to measure the strength of a relationship across many cases but to understand, through one information-rich case, how a particular kind of order produces security and denies violent extremism a foothold. This approach is appropriate to the research question, which is about mechanisms and processes — how order is built, how it works, and why it resists extremism — rather than about the distribution of an outcome across a population of states. A single case studied closely can reveal causal mechanisms that a broad comparison would miss.

3.2 Case selection

Somaliland was selected as what methodologists call a deviant or instructive case: an outcome that the dominant theory does not predict and therefore has much to teach. By the Weberian standard, Somaliland — unrecognised, poor, and lacking a central monopoly on force — should be a case of failure and insecurity; instead it has produced relative peace and has resisted violent extremism. This gap between what the standard theory predicts and what actually happened makes Somaliland



especially valuable for theory-building. The case is further strengthened by the availability of a close comparison that approximates what comparative political scientists call a most-similar-systems design: south-central Somalia shares Somaliland's society, religion, language and clan structure — holding many variables roughly constant — but differs on the key variable of interest, the approach to order, having taken the Weberian state-building path, and it produced the opposite security outcome. Because so much is shared, the difference in approach becomes the most plausible candidate explanation for the difference in result. This near-paired comparison, though not a controlled experiment and not free of confounding factors, allows the analysis to associate the difference in approach with the difference in result with more confidence than a single case alone would permit, while remaining candid about the other factors at work.

3.3 Data and sources

The analysis draws on three kinds of secondary evidence, triangulated against one another. The first is the scholarly case literature on Somaliland's state formation, which documents the reconciliation conferences, the integration of customary authority, and the political settlement. The second is the theoretical literature on hybrid political order and the negotiation of statehood, which supplies the conceptual framework. The third is the wider literature on governance, state failure and counter-terrorism in Somalia and comparable settings, which provides the comparison with the south and the account of how extremist groups establish themselves. The article does not rest on new primary fieldwork; for reasons of access and safety, and given its theory-building purpose, it synthesises existing knowledge rather than generating new field data.

3.4 Analytical approach and limitations

The analytical approach is to specify the mechanisms through which hybrid governance is claimed to produce security, and then to examine the Somaliland case for evidence of each, while drawing the contrast with the south to test whether the absence of those mechanisms is associated with the absence of the outcome. Three limitations should be stated plainly. First, a single case, even a well-chosen one, cannot establish a general law; the argument is offered as a strong, theoretically grounded interpretation, not a proof, and its transportability is treated explicitly in the discussion. Second, the reliance on secondary sources means the analysis is only as reliable as the literature it draws on, and Somaliland is a contested case about which reasonable scholars disagree. Third, the comparison with the south is a natural rather than a controlled one, so factors other than the governance approach — geography, clan configuration, particular histories — cannot be fully held constant; the discussion acknowledges these rather than assuming them away. These limitations bound the claims without undermining the central contribution, which is to identify and articulate a set of counter-terrorism mechanisms that the hybrid-order and counter-terrorism literatures have not previously joined.

4. Findings



The findings of the case analysis fall into two parts. The first reconstructs how Somaliland built its order from 1991 onward — the origin of its hybrid arrangement. The second identifies the specific mechanisms through which that arrangement produces security in practice. Together they establish the empirical basis for the discussion that follows.

4.1 How Somaliland built its order

The argument of this article rests on a particular reading of how Somaliland came to be peaceful, and that reading must be presented with care. Stated plainly, Somaliland built its order from the bottom up and from the inside out — through its own clan-based institutions and reconciliation processes, with little outside help — and it deliberately folded those institutions into the new state rather than discarding them. This origin is the key to everything that follows, because an order built with the inherited institutions, rather than against them, starts with a stock of legitimacy that an externally imposed state can only envy.

4.1.1 Community agency and the inheritance of 1991

The territory that is now Somaliland was once the British Somaliland Protectorate, while the south was Italian Somalia; the two joined at independence in 1960 to form the Somali Republic. The union was unhappy for the north from early on, and grievances deepened under the military regime of Siad Barre, whose forces inflicted devastating violence on the northern population in the late 1980s, including the bombing of the regional capital, Hargeisa. When the Barre regime collapsed in 1991 and Somalia fell into civil war, the Somali National Movement, drawing on northern clans, took control of the territory, and Somaliland declared the restoration of its independence within the borders of the former British protectorate. From the start, then, Somaliland's project was distinct from the south's: it was not trying to capture the Somali state in Mogadishu but to rebuild order within its own boundaries.

Crucially, Somaliland began this task with almost no international help. Because no country recognised its independence, the flood of foreign aid, peacekeepers and state-building expertise that poured into the south largely bypassed the north. This was in many ways a hardship, and it remains a grievance. But it had an unintended consequence that is central to this article: deprived of the option of building an externally funded Weberian state, Somalilanders had to build order with the resources at hand — their own clans, elders, customary law and communities (Kaplan, 2008; Renders & Terlinden, 2010). Necessity pushed them toward a home-grown, hybrid solution. The absence of the conventional treatment may, paradoxically, have been a blessing.

4.1.2 The reconciliation conferences



The heart of Somaliland's state formation was a series of clan reconciliation conferences held through the early 1990s. The independence declaration itself emerged from the Grand Conference of the Northern Peoples at Burco in 1991, and the most celebrated of the settlements was the conference at Borama in 1993, which ran for several months and produced both a peace charter and a national charter establishing the framework of government. These were not Western-style negotiations among political parties or armed factions brokered by foreign diplomats. They were gatherings of clan elders, conducted largely according to customary practice, sometimes lasting for months, in which the representatives of Somaliland's clans talked through their grievances, negotiated the terms of their coexistence, and built agreement the slow way (Walls, 2009). The elders drew on Xeer, the body of Somali customary law, and on the deep-rooted authority they held within their communities, to make peace between groups that had been at war. The settlement that emerged distributed political representation among the clans through a power-sharing formula — the beel system — that gave the arrangement its early legitimacy by ensuring that the major groups all had a recognised stake in the new order.

Two features of these conferences matter especially. First, they were locally owned and locally funded, paid for by Somaliland's own communities and businesspeople rather than by foreign donors, which meant the settlement belonged to Somalilanders and reflected their priorities rather than an outsider's template. Second, they produced not just a ceasefire but the political foundations of the new polity — agreements about how power would be shared among clans and how the new institutions would be organised. The peace was not imposed by a victorious army holding a monopoly on force; it was negotiated among the holders of legitimate authority and rested on their continued consent. Here is hybrid order at its point of origin: the state that emerged was built by the customary authorities and carried their legitimacy into its foundations.

4.1.3 Folding the elders into the state

The most institutionally striking result of this process was the way Somaliland built its inherited authority directly into the structure of the new state. Rather than creating a purely modern legislature and leaving the elders outside it, Somaliland established a bicameral parliament — a parliament with two chambers — one of which, the House of Elders, known as the Guurti, formally incorporated the clan elders into the machinery of government (Bradbury, 2008; Renders, 2012). The Guurti gave the customary authorities a permanent, official role in the state: a chamber of their own, with real functions in lawmaking, conflict resolution and the management of crises. The elders were not consulted informally and then sent home; they were made a standing part of the constitutional order.

This institutional choice is the concrete embodiment of hybrid governance, and it captures precisely what sets Somaliland apart. The modern and the customary were not set against each other, with one expected to give way to the other over time. They were fused into a single system



in which an elected lower house sat alongside a chamber of clan elders, the formal alongside the traditional, the modern state alongside the inherited authority of clan and custom. The arrangement has its critics and its problems — the Guurti's role has at times been controversial, and questions of representation and renewal are real, as Section 5.2 discusses (Hoehne, 2013). But as a design, it solved the central problem that defeats the Weberian template elsewhere: it gave the new state the legitimacy of the old institutions, by making those institutions part of the state rather than its rivals. The order that resulted could draw on a reservoir of acceptance that no externally built state in the region has matched.

4.2 How the order produces security in practice

With the origins of Somaliland's order established, the analysis turns to how that order produces security in everyday practice. The task is to move beyond the general notion of 'blending' institutions and to identify the specific mechanisms through which the hybrid arrangement generates order. There are four that matter most: legitimacy, local knowledge and early warning, customary dispute resolution, and community-embedded policing. Together they describe a system in which security is co-produced by state and society rather than delivered by the state alone. One clarification should be made before setting them out, and it will matter for the discussion that follows. The four mechanisms describe how the order works where it works well — in the core regions where the hybrid arrangement is dense, legitimate and accepted. They are not uniform across Somaliland's whole territory; at the contested margins and in the disputed eastern regions the same mechanisms are thinner and weaker, and, as Section 5.2 will argue, it is precisely there that the order's security advantage falls away. The account that follows is therefore a description of the mechanisms at their strongest, not a claim that they operate evenly everywhere.

4.2.1 Legitimacy: order people accept

The foundation of the whole arrangement is legitimacy. Because Somaliland's order was built by its own clan and customary authorities and folded them into the state, the resulting arrangement is widely accepted by the population as rightful in a way that an imposed state is not. This matters enormously for security, and the reason is practical, not merely philosophical. An authority that people regard as legitimate is obeyed voluntarily, most of the time, by most people; it does not have to coerce compliance at every turn. When a clan elder who is part of the governing order asks his community to keep the peace, to settle a dispute without violence, or to refuse shelter to a troublemaker, his word carries weight because his authority is accepted. A state able to draw on legitimacy of this kind obtains security cheaply and reliably, through consent; a state that lacks it must purchase or coerce security, and commonly fails to secure either. Legitimacy is the foundation on which all the other mechanisms rest.



4.2.2 Local knowledge and early warning

A second mechanism is local knowledge, and the early warning it makes possible. Clan elders and community leaders possess a detailed, intimate knowledge of their areas that no outside security force can replicate: they know the families, the histories, the tensions, and — critically — the strangers. In a society organised around clan and kinship, a newcomer is noticed; people know who belongs and who does not, who is connected to whom, and when something is out of place. This dense social knowledge functions as an early-warning system woven into the fabric of the community. When an outsider arrives with unclear purposes, when a young man begins to behave strangely, when a cell tries to establish itself, the community is often the first to know — and, where it is integrated into the order and trusts the authorities, the first to raise the alarm. No surveillance technology and no foreign intelligence service can match the coverage of a population that is itself watching, because it has a stake in the order and a channel through which to report. This is among the hybrid model's decisive advantages for counter-terrorism, a theme Section 5.1 develops.

4.2.3 Customary dispute resolution

A third mechanism lies in the resolution of disputes through customary law. Much violence in any society begins with unresolved grievances — over land, water, property, marriage, injury or insult — that fester and escalate. The Somali customary system, Xeer, administered by the elders, provides a fast, local, accepted means of settling such disputes before they explode. Because the elders are trusted and their decisions carry the weight of custom, parties accept outcomes they might resist from a distant and distrusted state court. By resolving conflicts at the local level, quickly and legitimately, the customary system drains away grievances that would otherwise accumulate into feuds and violence. In the hybrid arrangement, this dispute-resolution capacity is not a rival to the state's justice system but a complement to it, handling the bulk of everyday conflict and keeping the social peace that formal security depends on. A society whose disputes are continuously and acceptably resolved is a society that gives extremists less raw material to exploit.

4.2.4 Community-embedded policing

A fourth mechanism is policing embedded in, and accountable to, the community rather than imposed upon it. In the hybrid model, formal security forces do not operate as an alien presence patrolling a hostile population; they work in cooperation with clan and community structures, drawing on local consent and local information. When the police and the community see each other as partners rather than adversaries, ordinary people are willing to share information, to cooperate with investigations, and to help maintain order. This cooperation is the opposite of the dynamic in places where security forces are seen as the instruments of a faction: there, the population shields itself from the state, withholds information, and may even protect those the state is hunting. Community-embedded policing turns the population from an obstacle into a partner,



and in doing so multiplies the reach of a small and poorly resourced force far beyond what its numbers would suggest.

It repays attention to see how these four mechanisms reinforce one another. Legitimacy makes people willing to cooperate; local knowledge gives them something valuable to contribute; customary dispute resolution keeps grievances from accumulating; and community-embedded policing provides the channel through which cooperation flows to the formal security apparatus. Each strengthens the others, and together they constitute a system of security that is co-produced by state and society. This is the engine of hybrid security governance. The discussion that follows shows why it is so well suited, in particular, to the task of countering violent extremism.

5. Discussion

The findings show that Somaliland built a hybrid order and that this order produces security through four reinforcing mechanisms. The discussion now draws out what this means for the article's central claim. It develops the counter-terrorism argument directly, explaining why the hybrid arrangement denies violent extremists a foothold and contrasting Somaliland with south-central Somalia. It then confronts the main objections to the argument, and finally considers what does and does not transfer to other settings.

5.1 *Why hybrid governance counters terrorism*

The claim that hybrid security governance is an effective counter-terrorism paradigm needs to be argued, not merely asserted. This part of the discussion makes the case directly. It explains how violent extremist groups establish themselves, shows why the hybrid arrangement denies them the openings they need, and draws the contrast between Somaliland's relative success and the experience of south-central Somalia. The argument is not that Somaliland is invulnerable — no place is — but that its way of producing order systematically removes the conditions on which groups like Al Shabaab depend.

5.1.1 **How extremist groups gain a foothold**

To see why the hybrid model works against extremism, one must first understand how extremist groups take root. Such groups rarely conquer a settled, legitimately governed society by force alone. They establish themselves by exploiting gaps and grievances. They move into areas where the state is absent or distrusted and offer what it fails to provide — security, swift justice, a sense of order. They feed on unresolved disputes, recruiting the aggrieved and offering to settle scores. They exploit the alienation of communities that experience the state as a predatory or factional force, presenting themselves as a righteous alternative. And they rely on being able to move into a community unnoticed, to hide among a population that either supports them or is too frightened or too disconnected from the authorities to report them. In short, extremist groups need gaps — of governance, of legitimacy, of justice, of social cohesion — and they need a population that will not give them away.



5.1.2 How the hybrid model denies the foothold

Each of the mechanisms described in Section 4 closes one of these gaps. Where the state is distrusted, extremists offer an alternative order; but in Somaliland the order is legitimate, built with the population's own authorities, so the extremist offer of 'better governance' finds few takers. Where unresolved disputes generate recruits, the customary system resolves them quickly and acceptably, draining the reservoir of grievance on which the extremists would otherwise draw. Where alienated communities shield outsiders, Somaliland's communities are integrated into the order and have both the knowledge to notice a stranger and the trust to report him. The dense social fabric that gives the elders their early-warning capacity is precisely what an extremist cell most fears: a community that sees it arrive and tells the authorities. The hybrid model, in other words, does not wait to fight extremists after they have established themselves; it denies them the conditions they need to establish themselves in the first place. It is a form of prevention built into the structure of governance itself.

This marks a fundamental departure from the conventional, militarised model of counter-terrorism, which concentrates on hunting and killing extremists after they have taken root. That approach treats the population as a passive backdrop to a contest between the state's forces and the militants. The hybrid approach treats the population as the decisive actor — the terrain on which extremism either finds purchase or does not. By securing the legitimacy, cohesion and cooperation of that population, the hybrid model wins the contest before it becomes a military one. It is, in the fullest sense, a preventive paradigm: it renders the social environment inhospitable to extremism rather than attempting to clear extremism from a hospitable one by force.

5.1.3 The contrast with the south

The comparison with south-central Somalia sharpens the argument, and it is all the more telling because the two cases share so much — the same broader society, the same religion, the same language, the same clan structures, the same regional environment. What differs is the way order was approached. In the south, an externally backed effort to build a Weberian central state in Mogadishu produced a government that many experienced as factional and distrusted, security forces seen by some as the instruments of particular interests, and a marginalisation of the very clan and customary authorities that might have anchored a legitimate order. The gaps that resulted — of governance, legitimacy and justice — were exactly the gaps Al Shabaab moved into, offering its own harsh order and swift justice, feeding on grievances, and hiding among populations that had little reason to trust or inform the state. The conventional model did not merely fail to stop the extremists; by sidelining the sources of legitimate local order, it helped create the conditions in which they flourished.

Somaliland took the opposite path, and arrived at the opposite result. By building order with its clan and customary authorities rather than against them, it produced a legitimate, cohesive, self-policing society that has largely denied Al Shabaab the foothold the group secured in the south.



The difference is visible in the record of violence: where south-central Somalia has endured sustained insurgency, frequent bombings and large areas of extremist governance, Somaliland has experienced comparatively few major attacks over the same decades. The most serious exception is instructive rather than fatal to the argument: the coordinated suicide bombings in Hargeisa in 2008, which struck the presidential palace, the Ethiopian mission and a United Nations office, demonstrated that the group can occasionally penetrate even Somaliland's defences — but the attacks did not take root or recur at anything like southern frequency, in part because the dense social fabric and community cooperation that this article has described helped the authorities respond and helped deny the group a sustaining local base. The exception, in other words, tested the order and the order held. The contrast is not a controlled experiment, and other factors play a part — geography, clan configuration, the particular history of each area, and Somaliland's strong collective desire to protect the peace it built itself. Honesty requires acknowledging these. But the central difference in approach — hybrid order built with society in the north, Weberian state-building imposed from above in the south — tracks the central difference in outcome closely enough to carry real weight. The polity that embraced hybridity secured peace; the one that pursued the Weberian ideal did not.

There is a further, subtler point in the contrast. Somaliland's population has a powerful shared interest in defending the order it created: the peace is theirs, won at great cost and without outside help, and bound up with their aspiration to recognition and statehood. This collective ownership gives ordinary Somalilanders a stake in rejecting extremism that a population governed by a distrusted, externally imposed state simply does not have. People defend what they helped to build. The hybrid model, because it is built with the population, generates not just legitimacy and information but ownership — and ownership may be the most powerful counter-terrorism resource of all.

5.1.4 Religious authority and the contest of legitimacy

One dimension of the contest with violent extremism deserves separate attention, because it is easily overlooked by a purely security-focused analysis: the contest over religious legitimacy. Groups like Al Shabaab do not present themselves merely as armed challengers; they present themselves as the true guardians of Islam, claiming religious authority to justify their violence and to recruit. A counter-terrorism approach that is only military leaves this religious claim unanswered, ceding the moral and theological ground to the extremists. The hybrid model, by contrast, incorporates established religious authority — the respected clerics and scholars whose interpretation of Islam commands genuine popular respect — into the fabric of legitimate order. These authorities can and do contest the extremists' claim to speak for the faith, exposing the gap between the group's harsh and self-serving doctrine and the religious traditions the population actually holds.



This matters because the battle against an ideologically motivated movement is, in large part, a battle over legitimacy, including religious legitimacy. When the recognised religious authorities are integrated into the order and reject the extremists' theology, the group's central claim — that it represents true Islam against a corrupt or godless state — loses its force. The population has its own trusted religious voices, embedded in the legitimate order, telling it otherwise. Where, by contrast, the state is secular in a way that feels alien, or where it has alienated the religious establishment, the extremists' religious claim meets less resistance. The hybrid model's incorporation of customary and religious authority is therefore not only a source of social legitimacy but a direct asset in the ideological contest at the heart of counter-terrorism — a contest that guns alone cannot win.

The mechanism can be specified against what the al-Shabaab literature identifies as the movement's conditions of success. Al-Shabaab has expanded most effectively where it could present itself as a provider of order, justice and predictable rule in spaces the state had vacated or governed predatorily, offering courts and dispute resolution where formal institutions were absent or corrupt (Hansen, 2013). Hybrid security governance forecloses precisely these openings. By binding clan elders, customary (Xeer) adjudication and religious authority into the state, Somaliland occupies the very governance and moral-authority space that al-Shabaab elsewhere colonises. The everyday-peace literature explains why this matters: order produced and policed from below generates the dense local knowledge and social sanction through which communities identify and expel outsiders, so that intelligence and denial operate as a by-product of legitimate governance rather than as coercive imposition (Mac Ginty, 2014). Where the internationally backed mission had to fight for territory and then govern it as an external authority (Williams, 2018), Somaliland's order pre-empts the contest by leaving no ungoverned, illegitimate space for the movement to claim.

5.2 Objections, limits and dangers

An honest argument must confront its strongest objections, and the case for hybrid security governance has several that deserve serious treatment rather than dismissal. To celebrate Somaliland's achievement without acknowledging its costs and fragilities would be to romanticise it, and romanticism is a poor basis for either scholarship or policy. This section sets out a series of genuine problems: the exclusions built into clan-based order, the marginalisation of women, the questions of whether the model can scale and last, the danger of entrenching conservative authority, the paradox of recognition, and — most fundamentally — the charge that the very concept of hybrid order overstates the coherence of a contested reality. Taking these seriously does not overturn the argument, but it qualifies and sharpens it.



5.2.1 The exclusions of clan-based order

The most immediate objection is that an order built on clans is, by its very nature, one that includes some and excludes others. Clan-based systems distribute power and representation according to clan membership, which means that those belonging to powerful clans are advantaged and those belonging to weaker clans, or to minority groups outside the main clan structure, are disadvantaged. In Somaliland, minority communities and groups regarded as outside the dominant clan families have at times found themselves marginalised in a system that allocates voice and resources along clan lines. There are also territorial disputes, notably in the eastern regions, where clans whose kin straddle the border with Somalia have contested Somaliland's authority and its claim to their loyalty. A hybrid order built on clan is therefore not an order of equal citizens; it carries the inequalities of the clan system into the structure of the state. This is a real cost, and it limits how unreservedly the model can be praised.

5.2.2 The marginalisation of women

The second and most serious objection concerns women. The customary and clan institutions at the heart of the hybrid order are male-dominated; the councils of elders are councils of men, and the customary system reaches its decisions, including decisions that affect women profoundly, without women's voices in the room. When such institutions are folded into the state, as in the House of Elders, the male character of customary authority is carried into formal politics, and women remain badly under-represented in the institutions that govern. The very features that give the hybrid order its legitimacy and stability — its rootedness in inherited custom — are also the features that perpetuate the exclusion of half the population from real power. This is not a small qualification. A model of order that delivers peace and security but does so partly by entrenching the subordination of women has purchased its stability at a price that must be named honestly, and that any defender of the model is obliged to confront rather than to minimise.

5.2.3 Can it scale, and can it last?

A third objection concerns scale and durability. Somaliland is relatively small, with a population bound together by a strong shared narrative of suffering under Barre and of peace built by its own hand. Critics reasonably ask whether a model that worked under these particular conditions could work in a far larger, more diverse and more fragmented society such as south-central Somalia, where clan competition is more intense and no comparable shared narrative exists. There is also a question of durability over time. The reconciliation conferences and the integration of the elders belonged to a founding moment; sustaining hybrid legitimacy across generations, as the founding elders pass and as a younger, more urban and connected population comes of age with different expectations, is a continuing challenge. The role of the Guurti, in particular, has at times generated controversy over how its members are selected and renewed and over its place in political disputes. A model that depends heavily on the authority of a particular generation of elders must find ways to renew its legitimacy, or risk becoming a brake on change rather than an anchor of order.



5.2.4 Entrenching conservative power

A fourth objection follows directly from the third. By giving customary and religious authorities a formal, protected role in the state, the hybrid model risks entrenching conservative forces and slowing the social change that many — especially the young and women — may desire. An arrangement that draws its stability from inherited authority has a built-in bias toward the status quo. What looks from one angle like a valuable anchor of legitimate order can look from another like an obstacle to reform, a way of locking in the power of older men and customary norms against the aspirations of a changing society. The tension between stability and change is real and unresolved, and it would be dishonest to pretend the hybrid model escapes it. The same institutions that prevent the disorder extremists exploit may also impede the reforms a just society requires.

What should be made of these objections together? They do not, in this article's view, defeat the argument, but they decisively qualify it. They show that hybrid security governance is not a utopia but a trade-off — one that purchases legitimacy, stability and security at the cost of certain exclusions and a bias toward conservation. The honest claim is comparative, not absolute: that for the conditions of the Horn of Africa, where the Weberian alternative has repeatedly produced neither security nor justice, a hybrid order that delivers peace while carrying these real flaws may still be the better available path — provided its flaws are recognised and worked on rather than ignored. The task is not to abandon the model but to improve it from within: to widen its inclusion, to open space for women, and to renew its legitimacy across generations, without sacrificing the rootedness that makes it work.

5.2.5 The recognition paradox

A final complication is worth naming, because it cuts in an unexpected direction. Somaliland's lack of international recognition, treated throughout this article as a hardship, has arguably also protected the very hybrid order that produced its success. Because no recognised government in Mogadishu controlled the flow of aid and state-building support into the north, Somaliland was spared the externally driven push to build a conventional Weberian state — the push that, in the south, sidelined customary authority and helped open the gaps extremists exploited. The absence of recognition, paradoxically, may have preserved the space in which a home-grown hybrid order could grow. This is the recognition paradox: the thing Somaliland most wants — international recognition and the resources and legitimacy it would bring — might, if granted on conventional terms, pressure it toward the very Weberian model that has failed its neighbour, and erode the hybrid arrangement that has served it so well.

This is no longer a purely hypothetical dilemma. In December 2025 Israel became the first state to extend bilateral recognition to Somaliland (Reuters, 2025; CNN, 2025) — a landmark diplomatic breakthrough, though one that falls well short of the full international recognition that United Nations admission and African Union endorsement would confer, and Somaliland remains outside both. The event nonetheless makes the recognition paradox concrete: it opens the prospect of aid,



investment and security partnership, but also of precisely the external resources and leverage that, applied on conventional terms, could pull Somaliland toward the Weberian template this article has shown to fail. Whether recognition, as it widens, strengthens or erodes the self-reliant hybrid order described here is now a live and pressing question rather than a distant one.

The paradox should not be overstated; recognition would bring real benefits, and Somalilanders are right to seek it. But it carries a genuine warning for the international community. If recognition or large-scale support were to arrive with the usual strings — demands to build standard state institutions, to professionalise security forces on the conventional template, to sideline ‘informal’ customary authority as a relic — it could undermine the foundations of Somaliland’s stability in the name of strengthening its state. The lesson, consistent with the rest of this article, is that external support should reinforce the legitimate hybrid order that exists rather than replace it with a template that has failed elsewhere. Recognition, if it comes, should come on terms that respect what Somaliland actually built.

5.2.6 The strongest objection: are the limits of hybridity understated?

The objections so far concern the costs of Somaliland’s hybrid order. A deeper objection concerns the concept itself, and it must be confronted because it is the most serious challenge to the whole argument. Some scholars — Hoehne (2013) most pointedly — have argued that the celebratory ‘hybrid political order’ reading of Somaliland is too tidy, smoothing a messy and contested reality into a harmonious model. On this view, the blending of customary and state authority is not the stable, mutually reinforcing partnership the framework implies, but an unsettled and shifting balance, marked by friction, by the erosion of customary authority as the state grows, and by serious strain in the contested eastern regions where Somaliland’s claim is itself disputed. The worry is that ‘hybridity’ functions less as an analytical description than as an approving label, one that papers over conflict, exaggerates coherence, and mistakes a temporary and fragile equilibrium for a durable design.

This objection has real force, and it should be conceded where it is right rather than resisted. The hybrid order in Somaliland is indeed contested, uneven and in flux; the relationship between the elders and the elected state has shifted over time, often with friction, and the authority of customary institutions has in places been weakened rather than strengthened by their incorporation into the state. The eastern disputes are a genuine limit on the reach of the order, not a footnote to it. Any honest account must hold these in view, and the framework is weaker if it is taken to imply a frictionless harmony. To that extent the critique lands, and this article accepts it: hybridity here is a live, contested process, not a finished and balanced architecture.

But conceding this does not overturn the article’s argument; it refines it. The claim advanced here is not that Somaliland’s hybrid order is harmonious, stable for all time, or free of internal contradiction — it is none of these. The claim is narrower and survives the critique: that, contested and imperfect as it is, this arrangement has produced more legitimate order and greater resistance



to violent extremism than the Weberian alternative imposed next door, and that it has done so through identifiable mechanisms that the conventional model lacks. A hybrid order can be messy, frictional and fragile and still outperform the alternative on the specific dimension that concerns this article, which is the denial of a foothold to extremist groups. Indeed, taking the critique seriously strengthens the counter-terrorism argument rather than weakening it, because it locates the danger precisely: the threat to Somaliland's security is most acute exactly where the hybrid order is thinnest and most contested — in the marginalised peripheries and the disputed east — which is what the mechanism account would predict. The lesson is not that hybridity is a tidy success but that its security benefits track the depth and legitimacy of the order, and fall away where that order is weak. That is a more demanding and more useful claim than the celebratory reading the critics rightly reject.

5.3 What travels, and what does not

If Somaliland's hybrid order has produced security where the conventional model has failed, the natural question is what other places can learn from it. Here caution is essential. Somaliland is a particular place with a particular history, and the worst response to its success would be to turn it into a template to be copied mechanically elsewhere — which would repeat, in a new form, the very error of imposing a single model regardless of context. The lesson of Somaliland is not a blueprint but a principle, and it is worth being clear about which is which.

What does not travel is the specific institutional form. The House of Elders, the particular role of Xeer, the configuration of Somaliland's clans and the precise design of its reconciliation conferences are products of Somali society and history; they cannot be exported to a society with different institutions, different forms of customary authority and a different past. Any attempt to install a 'Guurti' in a society that has no equivalent of the Somali clan elder would be as artificial, and as doomed, as the imposition of a Weberian state has been. The details are not the lesson.

What does travel is the underlying principle: that in places where the Weberian state is absent and unlikely to arrive soon, security and order are better built with society's own legitimate authorities than imposed upon society from above. The principle directs attention to a set of questions that can be asked anywhere: Who holds legitimate authority in the eyes of this population? What institutions actually produce order and resolve disputes here, whatever their formal status? How could the formal state work with these authorities rather than against them, drawing on their legitimacy, knowledge and reach? How can security be co-produced with communities rather than delivered to them? These questions, and the disposition behind them — a willingness to treat non-state and customary authority as a resource rather than an obstacle — are what Somaliland teaches. The answers will differ in every setting, and that is the point. Hybridity is not one model but a family of context-specific arrangements united by a common refusal to assume that the Weberian state is the only road to order.



This carries a direct implication for how outsiders engage with fragile and conflict-affected places. Instead of asking how to build a strong central state on the standard template, and treating everything that deviates from it as a problem, external actors might ask how to support and strengthen the legitimate hybrid orders that already exist, however unfamiliar they look. This means resisting the impulse to insist on the forms of the Weberian state as a condition of support, and attending instead to the substance of legitimate order wherever it is being produced. It is a more modest and more patient disposition than the ambitious state-building of recent decades, and — if the Somaliland case is any guide — a more effective one.

6. Conclusion

This article began with a puzzle: why has Somaliland, a long-unrecognised and impoverished self-governing de facto state without a Weberian monopoly on force, produced durable peace and kept violent extremism at bay, while its internationally backed neighbour, the recipient of a generation of conventional state-building, has not? The answer offered here is that Somaliland built its order in a fundamentally different way — not by constructing a strong central state to replace its inherited institutions, but by blending clan elders, customary law, religious authority and communities into the fabric of governance. The result is what this article has called hybrid security governance: an order co-produced by state and society, drawing its strength from legitimacy, local knowledge, customary dispute resolution and community-embedded policing.

The central claims have been two. First, that this hybrid order is not a halfway house on the road to a ‘proper’ Weberian state but a coherent and legitimate form of political order in its own right — one better suited, in important respects, to the conditions of the Horn of Africa than the model it departs from. Second, that it is an effective counter-terrorism paradigm, because it denies violent extremist groups the gaps of governance, legitimacy, justice and social cohesion on which they depend, and because it enlists the population as the decisive producer of its own security. Where the conventional model fights extremists after they take root, the hybrid model prevents them from taking root at all.

None of this is to romanticise Somaliland, whose order carries real costs: the exclusions of clan-based representation, the marginalisation of women, the questions of scale and durability, and the bias toward conservative authority. These are not incidental blemishes but structural features that any honest account must hold alongside the achievement, and any defender of the model is obliged to work to remedy. The argument is comparative and qualified, not utopian: for settings where the Weberian alternative has produced neither security nor justice, a hybrid order that delivers peace while carrying these flaws may still be the better available path — if its flaws are confronted rather than concealed.



The wider lesson reaches beyond Somaliland and beyond counter-terrorism. For more than a century, the Weberian state has been treated as the single destination toward which all political order must travel, and deviations from it as failures to be corrected. Somaliland suggests that this assumption is too narrow. Order can be built, and security produced, in more than one way; and in much of the world, the path runs not through the imposition of a monopoly on force but through the patient blending of the authorities that a society already accepts. To see that is to open the possibility of working with the world as it is, rather than forcing it toward a template it has repeatedly resisted. In places where the Weberian state is absent and unlikely to arrive, the most important insight may be the simplest: that security is better built with society than imposed upon it.

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