



Conflict Research Programme

Research Memo

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Private Military and Security Companies and the Political Marketplace in Mogadishu

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This research memo is an abridged version of an internally circulated memo that analyses the evolving role of international Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in Somalia through the lens of the political marketplace. Focusing on the growth of security firms within (and around) Mogadishu's green zone, it highlights how security firms to an extent position themselves as 'gatekeepers' for the international community, and within a political marketplace for security services that is transactional rather than regulated. Yet, in the absence of effective formal regulation, PMSCs are heavily reliant upon so-called 'local' partners to navigate this marketplace, who provide information, a point of access into clan, kinship and personal relations and the political capital necessary to operate. Focusing on the period 2008-late 2017, the memo tracks the rise of a commercial security industry in Mogadishu. PMSCs are one of a number of different state and non-state security providers operating in Mogadishu, and in recent years the numbers and power of PMSCs has waned, as AMISOM has gained more influence and the federal government has made attempts to control the sector. The memo begins with an overview of the evolution of PMSCs in Somalia, before analysing in more detail the effects of this growth.

The evolution of PMSCs in Somalia

The current phase of PMSC involvement in Somalia, with its locus in Mogadishu, has its genesis in the routing of the Islamic Courts Union by a US-backed Ethiopian invasion in 2006, and the subsequent deployment of the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM) in February 2007 to support the fledgling Transitional Federal Government (TFG). On the ground in Mogadishu, then under effective al-Shabaab control, a hitherto unknown entity called *Bancroft* was responsible for 'mentoring' the African peacekeeping troops, though numerous reports suggest the mostly European, South African and American mentors also participated in active combat. AMISOM and *Bancroft* secured an area of land around Mogadishu's airport, transforming it into what would later become a green zone for the international community.

After the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) was established in August 2012, and with al-Shabaab withdrawing from Mogadishu in late 2011, elements of the international

¹ This memo is based on the author's doctoral fieldwork, which is currently being prepared into a manuscript for publication under the provisional title 'Fragile Soldiers: Private Security in East Africa'.

community, notably the UN and the EU, began to move their operations from Nairobi into the green zone. This correlated with increasing numbers of PMSCs, many of which had made their names in Iraq and Afghanistan and as opportunities there waned, saw the international expansion into Somalia and revamped donor commitments as an indication of an emerging market. The 2013 Somali Compact which framed future relations between Somalia and the international community identified building national security institutions as a central priority, and security spending constitutes a significant portion of international funding to Somalia. In 2017, money for security cooperation was conservatively estimated at USD\$400m per year.² PMSCs are considerable beneficiaries of this, and *Bancroft* was joined by several other PMSCs performing a variety of training, logistics, and capacity building roles to AMISOM and the inchoate Somali security services.

Beyond this direct support, a security industry also developed to meet the demands of a growing number of political consultants, humanitarian and for-profit development actors, as well as the diplomatic staff circulating in and out of the green zone. PMSCs provided risk management services, as well as armed Private Security Detail (PSD) and convoy protection to facilitate meetings outside of the green zone, mostly with the nascent Somali government. PMSCs also provide a range of security services for so-called 'frontier' business interests operating outside of the auspices of international stabilisation agendas in Somalia. Security has also increasingly become an umbrella concept: a way to sell a plethora of other services including accommodation, hospitality and even recreation.

The green zone is the locus of international PMSC activity in Somalia, and business depends upon its existence. Whilst most firms reside inside the green zone, a few have set up outside, with mixed success. These PMSCs frame this as a decision that allows them to be more plugged into the city than inside the 'echo chamber' of the green zone, but it is likely that the more pressing issue is the difficulty of procuring land, where competition has intensified in recent years and a relationship to AMISOM is essential. Outside of Mogadishu PMSCs presence is limited due to higher operating fees, less international investment, and a more uncertain environment, particularly due to the absence of any AMISOM protected green zone.

PMSCs and the political marketplace

This section describes how PMSCs work and their effects. Both international PMSCs and their so-called 'local' partners fits into a pattern of recurrent extraversion strategies that have come to define state-building processes in Somalia since the collapse of the state in 1991.³ PMSCs are not simply a substitution for state activities, or an effect of the failure of state-building. Instead, they are best understood as part of an alternative form of governance which has been described as a political marketplace.⁴

It is helpful to think of PMSCs as positioning themselves as 'gatekeepers' between the green zone and the city. Security contractors provide risk reports to incoming clients and are often the first face clients see when they arrive and who they check out with when they leave. Whilst most international staff circulate in and out of the green zone for a period of days, weeks or months, security contractors' have generated a much more permanent presence, often over a period of several years. A few have been in and out of Mogadishu for almost a decade. Even the small national military contingents contained within the green zone are often on six-month rotations and restricted by overly stringent force protection protocols that often do not allow them to leave the compound or access local knowledge circuits.

2 De Waal, Alex (2017) *Somalia synthesis paper*. Conflict Research Programme. London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

3 Hagmann, Tobias (2016) *Stabilization, extraversion and political settlements in Somalia*. Nairobi: Rift Valley Institute.

4 De Waal, Alex (2015) *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa: Money, War and the Business of Power*. Cambridge: Polity.

'Local' partners

PMSCs (and many of their clients) therefore depend upon the continued existence of a green zone as an internationalized bubble of sovereignty. Yet securitised spaces such as Mogadishu's green zone are never as sealed off from the wider social and political environment as their proponents might idealise, and contractors' role as interlocutors is dependent upon their imbrication within city-wide economies of protection and coercion. The green zone's existence benefits not only PMSCs (and their clients), but also a cadre of Somali political entrepreneurs, for whom it is a source of lucrative international security rents. These entrepreneurs are described by expatriate security contractors as local partners. Yet 'local' does not adequately capture the nature of this arrangement. Many are Somali diaspora, and the relationship is perhaps better understood as a relationship between two sets of different transnational actors.

Local interlocutors are necessary to guide international PMSCs through opaque registration processes, and to assist with the importation of weapons, equipment and armored vehicles. Accessing timely and accurate information is key to successfully playing the political marketplace and the local partner is also an important source of such information. The local partner provides a point of access into clan and kinship networks, and into the broader political marketplace that allows access to the city necessary for the everyday PSD and convoy services that PMSCs sell. Yet this also means that PMSCs access is usually limited to their partner's zone of influence and clan presence in the city.

There is a clear interest in sustaining high rates for security services on both sides of the green zone, and politics and the business of security are heavily interconnected. PMSCs Somali partners are typically influential diaspora that are often well-connected to government, and sometimes even serving politicians. There are also strong links between private security and aid contracts. A recent report⁵ identified how a cohort of influential Somali businessmen with a history of extraversion continue to profit off the international intervention in Somalia. Many were former UN WFP contractors that had won lucrative contracts in food distribution, security and logistics under UNOSOM, and have since converted this wealth into political power, and notably in investments in the green zone.

Conclusion

Since the deployment of AMISOM in 2007, and particularly since the establishment of the FGS in 2012, the number and activities of PMSCs has grown in Somalia. The locus of this activity is Mogadishu, where an AMISOM protected green zone has become a semi-permanent site of internationalized sovereignty and home to a growing security industry. PMSCs in conjunction with politically connected Somali security firms assume the role of gatekeepers for the international community, and actively maintain the green zone's inside/outside dichotomy of risk and danger. This clearly undermines the stated aims of international assistance to rebuild national security institutions in Somalia, and instead PMSCs are better seen as part of an alternative governing system. PMSCs operate in the context of a transactional, exclusionary and violent politics where the federal government is one player amongst many in Mogadishu (and Somalia's) decentralized political marketplace. AMISOM, whilst clearly of a different character to PMSCs, nevertheless also plays a critical role as gatekeeper for the international community, both competing and working with PMSCs. This market in security services operates differently to one that is regulated by an institutionalized state apparatus. It is not clear to what extent Government attempts to regulate this sector have been successful or are rather ad-hoc attempts to extract security rents. Yet it is apparent that business and security are irretrievably entangled on both sides of the green zone's blast walls. In Mogadishu, PMSCs power does not come from the gun, or the armoured car, but from the extent to which they are integrated into Somalia's mercurial political marketplace.

⁵ Jaspars, Susanne, Adan, Guhad and Majid, Nisar (2019) *Food and power in Somalia: business as usual?* Conflict Research Programme, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.



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