Securitized Border Governance

Local Realities from the Kenya–Somalia and Ethiopia–Sudan Borders

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Introduction

The contemporary global system is anchored in the principle of state sovereignty, a concept of having supreme ruling authority over a fixed, independent territory. This model traces its origins to the 1648 Westphalian Peace treaties in Europe, which established the nation-state as the primary political unit and equated a government's authority with its absolute control over a clearly demarcated geographic space.[1] Over the subsequent centuries, this Westphalian blueprint became the universal standard for state relations under the structural assumption that clearly defined borders on a map ensure domestic order and prevent interstate conflict. Exact linear divisions replaced older notions of fluid frontier zones as states consolidated their domestic legal systems within strictly entrenched spaces.[2]

In the modern era, this rigid state-centric instinct manifests globally through the construction of massive physical barriers designed to enforce absolute territorial exclusion. The United States-Mexico border wall exemplifies this reality. With tens of billions of dollars in federal funding and state-level infrastructure programmes such as Texas's Project Lone Star, the American state has increasingly sought to bolster its southern frontier with 30-foot steel bollards and detection corridors.[3] But this securitized enforcement is often unable to stop migration or illicit flows as envisioned, as instead it creates an ongoing human security and social crises.

However, when this rigid European border model was exported to the African continent during colonial administration in the late nineteenth-century, it systematically ignored centuries of existing indigenous socio-cultural organization. During the 1884–1885 Berlin Conference, European colonial powers arbitrarily partitioned the continent to suit imperial economic and political interests, severing unified ethnic groups, cutting off seasonal pastoral migration routes, and enclosing historical rivals within shared administrative units.[4] At independence, African states chose to maintain these artificial boundaries under the Organization of African Unity's (OAU) 1963 principle of *uti possidetis juris.*[5] Under this principle of international law the OAU sought to preserve inherited colonial borders as a pragmatic attempt to prevent widespread continental chaos and secessionist conflicts. Consequently, to date, African borderlands remain fundamentally contested, functionally porous, and poorly aligned with the physical, historical, social and cultural realities.

This paper analyses how borders are governed in practice, assessing the Kenya-Somalia border and the Ethiopia–Sudan (Al-Fashaga) border as two case studies. The analysis is structured around key themes including securitization, informal governance, and local dynamics to compare how state-centric approaches interact with borderland realities.

Kenya-Somalia Border

The Kenya–Somalia border is one of the most highly securitized border zones in East Africa. It is also characterized by heavy cross-border traffic, multiple porous points, and culturally homogeneous and deeply interconnected communities on both sides of the border.

The cross-border economy of the Mandera–Bula Hawa corridor, a critical border zone in the Gedo region of Somalia, adjacent to Mandera County in Kenya, functions as a sophisticated, integrated system where Informal Cross-Border Trade (ICBT) serves as the primary engine for community survival. This trade is built upon centuries-old, trust-based kinship networks that operate outside the formal state structures and institutions but carry greater local legitimacy. Trade in livestock is the heart of this system. Cattle, goats and camels are driven from Somalia's vast rangelands into Kenyan centres like Mandera and Garissa, on their way to the high-demand markets in Nairobi. On the other hand, Somalia's intense export networks turn Bula Hawa into a huge transit hub for consumer goods. Sugar and rice are key food items that flow into Kenya along with electronics, solar panels and construction materials.[6] This exchange is reinforced by the fast-moving, high-demand trade in Miraa (Khat), a daily logistical operation running from parts of central Kenya into Somalia, providing the steady cash flow that sustains trade across the border.

Despite this fluid economic interaction, border management remains highly militarized and restricted. Kenya's intervention in Somalia under *Operation Linda nchi*[7] in October 2011, effectively transformed the Mandera–Bula Hawa border point into a military outpost. Border operations were altered to focus primarily on surveillance, military logistical facilitation and provide backward cover for troops advancing deeper into Southern Somalia.[8] In turn, the Kenya Defence Forces took over major border management roles and restricted movements in order to limit infiltration by armed groups, and consequently, the Kenya-Somali border was officially closed by Nairobi in 2011.

In April 2026, the Kenyan government officially reopened the Mandera, Liboi and Kiunga border posts, ending a 15-year official closure, making it its most significant border management intervention.[9] Nairobi's strategy to harden the frontier consisted in establishing a buffer zone that would confine the primary theatre of war to the Somali territory. For a period, the closure of formal border posts such as Liboi and Mandera compelled al-Shabaab to use more difficult and unmonitored routes for a while, which hindered their ability to move large-scale vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices directly into Kenyan urban centres.[10]

In 2015, a project to build a border fence along the Kenya–Somalia border was launched with a budget of eight billion Kenya Shillings. The initiative was intended to extend 700 kilometres from Mandera to the Indian Ocean and incorporate surveillance systems, checkpoints, and patrol posts to prevent incursions by Al-Shabaab.[11] The project was later stopped in 2019, after about 10 kilometres, built at a staggering cost of Kenya Shillings 3.4 billion according to a report in The Star newspaper. In Bula Hawa, sections of the border barrier were reportedly removed by residents who viewed it as disruptive to established patterns of coexistence.[12] Communities with family members on both sides of the Kenya–Somalia border reported experiencing increased separation, while cross-border trade was significantly affected.[13] These approaches reflect a centralized model of security governance, in which control is exercised from the national level with limited integration of local knowledge systems.

Communities living along the border have historically maintained dense social and economic ties that predate the modern boundary. They maintain strong transboundary socio-economic and cultural ties through participation in informal cross-border trade (ICBT), shared kinship networks, and the movement of livestock and people across the border. These patterns complicate security-focused strategies, as restrictions on movement disrupt local economies and weaken cooperation between communities and state authorities. Despite these realities, state responses have largely framed the region through a counterterrorism lens, driven by the persistent threat posed by al-Shabaab.[14]

Moreover, local populations possess critical knowledge of movement patterns, and emerging threats. Yet, this knowledge remains underutilized within formal security frameworks.[15] The resulting gap has contributed to mistrust, reduced intelligence sharing, and, in some cases, the marginalization of communities whose cooperation is essential for effective counterinsurgency.[16] This creates a structural disconnect in which actionable local knowledge is neither systematically collected nor integrated into decision-making processes. While these measures have strengthened the state's capacity to respond to immediate threats posed by al-Shabaab, their effectiveness is limited when they do not align with local socio-cultural and economic dynamics. Despite this disconnect, local systems operate with a degree of autonomy, although they are not entirely separate from state structures. In the Mandera–Bula Hawa corridor, the efficacy of formal surveillance technologies is often compromised by difficult terrain and limited financial resources. As a result, the state security actors must rely largely on residents to act as an organic intelligence network. These borderland communities are built around close-knit sub-clans with intimate knowledge of individual identities, so locals are in a good position to identify "strangers" or outsiders moving through the dense scrubland who could be affiliated with militant groups like al-Shabaab.[17] This collective vigilance acts as a vital early warning system to alert authorities to suspicious activity or impending raids that technology-based surveillance may not detect and thus helps to bridge the gap between state capacity and borderland realities.

In practice, coordination between communities and government authorities exists but is uneven. Thus, interactions between communities and public authorities remain inconsistent and at times strained. Government and international agencies are largely concentrated in the main towns, where they operate alongside a heavy security presence. In some instances, local authorities are informally incorporated into security structures, particularly through community policing initiatives and ad hoc consultation mechanisms. In others, state interventions are implemented without meaningful local engagement, leading to perceptions of exclusion and mistrust.[18] As a result, deep-seated injustices and a sense of marginalization among Kenya's many minority ethnic and Muslim groups have provided fertile ground for al-Shabaab to localize its jihad at Kenya's margins.[19] This uneven integration reflects the absence of institutionalized frameworks that formally recognize and incorporate community-based governance systems into state security strategies.

The result is a hybrid but fragmented system of governance, in which state and local actors operate in parallel rather than in coordination. While both possess valuable capacities, the lack of structured collaboration limits their collective effectiveness in addressing insecurity along the border.

The limitations of this fragmented governance system are particularly evident in recent debates surrounding border reopening and the evolving security situation in Somalia. An assessment by The Hiraal Institute indicates that al-Shabaab has successfully recovered most of the central Somali territory it relinquished during the government's 2023 offensive. This reported increase in the group's strength, signals a significant setback for federal forces and a major shift in the regional security landscape[20] and raises major concerns on whether reopening the border is strategic for Kenya.

On a regional perspective, integration of East African states provides a strong economic and security incentive for improved relations between the two nations. Since Somalia's entry into the East African Community (EAC) in 2024 Kenya holds a unique strategic position as the only member state sharing a land border with Somalia. Consequently, Kenya is positioned to serve as the buffer between Somali and the EAC member countries.

Ethiopia–Sudan (Al-Fashaga) Border

Like numerous border disputes in Africa, the dispute over the Ethiopia-Sudan border in the Al-Fashaga region traces its origins to the arbitrary borders imposed by imperial powers, lines drawn without regard for local communities, ethnic ties, or historical governance. The Anglo-Ethiopian treaty of 1902 saw the British draw a border between the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and Ethiopia. British Sudan's claim over the resource-rich Al-Fashaga region ignored the demographic reality of co-habitation between Ethiopian and Sudanese farmers. By failing to establish a formal and inclusive border agreement, the colonial administration left a legacy of administrative vacuum and legal uncertainty, which continues to fuel bilateral tensions and border militarization in the present day. For over a century, Ethiopian Amhara farmers continued to settle and cultivate land that was declared to be part o, paying taxes to the Ethiopian government and existing in a space where Sudanese administrative control and law enforcement simply did not exist on the ground.

At the state level, Ethiopia and Sudan have engaged in mutual destabilization campaigns in their competition for regional hegemony for decades now. In the 1980s, Communist Ethiopia armed Sudanese rebels while Sudan aided ethno-nationalist armed groups in Ethiopia, including the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF). In the 1990s, Sudan supported militant Islamist groups while Ethiopia backed the Sudanese opposition. Ethiopia supported the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), while Sudan provided a rear base for the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF). These campaigns, while stemming from broader regional dynamics beyond the Al-Fashaga deadlock, highlight how broader state contestations always play out in such contested borderlands, resulting in more social and ethnic clashes.

From 2008 until 2020, Ethiopia and Sudan maintained stability through a "practical use" agreement that allowed Ethiopian farmers to cultivate land in Al-Fashaga while recognizing Sudan's legal ownership. This peaceful compromise ended in November 2020 when the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) exploited Ethiopia's preoccupation with the Tigray War to forcibly seize the territory. This shift enabled Sudanese investors and the SAF to reclaim fertile lands, rerouting the sesame trade away from Ethiopian markets to sustain the war economy in Khartoum. By clearing out Ethiopian settlements and establishing a permanent military presence, Sudan was internationally perceived as taking advantage of its neighbour's internal crisis to resolve a long-standing border dispute.

The heavy militarization of the Ethiopia–Sudan border has fundamentally altered the socio-economic landscape for local populations, replacing communal cooperation with state-led exclusion. By establishing permanent military fortifications and clearing out long-standing Ethiopian settlements in Al-Fashaga, the SAF have displaced thousands of people from their primary means of survival. This shift has destroyed local livelihoods and dismantled informal agreements that once prioritized shared harvests over rigid map lines, creating a "protection gap" that local militias often exploit. Furthermore, the excessive securitization of these frontiers has inadvertently pushed disenfranchised youth toward radicalization, as the destruction of traditional trade and agricultural systems leaves them with few alternative sources of income or agency.

The proliferation of both formal and informal checkpoints has transformed the borderland trade routes into a highly fragmented and securitized landscape. Managed by a volatile mix of official state forces including the Ethiopian Federal Police and National Defence Force and irregular militias such as the Fano and Kimant rebels, an analysis of the border revealed that these roadblocks occur as frequently as every 15 to 20 kilometres. This dense infrastructure of control functions as a mechanism to regulate and tax the circulation of people and goods through the threat of force, significantly hindering regional commerce. In more remote sectors, these informal checkpoints further destabilize the region by providing strategic cover for smuggling operations and various criminal activities. The current state of the border is defined by a dense, overlapping infrastructure of control that hinders regional commerce through the threat of force.

While Al-Fashaga is primarily known for territorial dispute, the destabilization of the border extends south into the Kurmuk region of Sudan's Blue Nile State. Kurmuk serves as a critical parallel case study where Al-Fashaga is defined by a struggle over resource-rich land, Kurmuk is defined by its role as a strategic gateway for cross-border insurgencies and the movement of displaced populations. This southern corridor highlights that the administrative vacuum initially left by colonial boundaries is not a localized error but a systemic feature of the contemporary Ethiopia–Sudan border.

The long-standing tradition of mutual destabilization has entered a volatile new phase following the outbreak of the Sudanese civil war in April 2023. Recent reports suggest that the Ethiopia–Sudan border, particularly the corridors near Kurmuk and the southern reaches of Al-Fashaga, has become a strategic rear base for the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). Allegations have emerged that the Ethiopian government is facilitating RSF logistics and allowing the group to launch cross-border attacks against SAF positions in Blue Nile and Gedaref states. Though the Ethiopian government denies these claims. Ethiopia and Sudan have seemingly supported insurgents in each other's countries for a long time and continue to do so.

Comparative Analysis

The Kenya–Somalia (Mandera-Bula Hawa) and Ethiopia–Sudan (Al-Fashaga) borderlands, despite their different state security consideration and contexts, reveal common structural tension between state-centric security strategies and the lived realities of borderland communities. In both instances, securitized forms of border management based on territorial enforcement and mobility controls, military presence and surveillance, without sufficiently integrating informal socio-economic systems that guarantee everyday stability in these areas have been used. This section comparatively explores how this disjuncture unfolds through a focus on the limits of securitization, the marginalization of informal governance systems and implications this has for security outcomes. By examining how securitization operates in both cases, but also why it emerges, how it is institutionalized, and with what consequences for local governance and security outcomes, The common ground between the two is the predominance of securitization as the dominant framework for the governance of borders.

The Securitization of Border Space

The administration of both the Kenya–Somalia and Ethiopia–Sudan borders reflect a similar securitized approach to border governance even when the local contexts differ. In the case of the Kenya–Somalia border, securitization owes to the state-led counterterrorism efforts, primarily driven by the threat posed by al-Shabaab. The state's efforts remain fundamentally incomplete when relying on military means alone without being reinforced by robust community mobilization and targeted religious outreaches.

In contrast, securitization in Al-Fashaga along the Ethiopia–Sudan border is linked more to territorial control and competition over resources rather than to state security threats. The Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) replaced informal border arrangements with permanent military positions. At the same time, they removed Ethiopian Amhara settlements and ended practices that had allowed shared agricultural use of the area despite disputed sovereignty.

Although the two contexts differ, they reveal a common pattern of state response. The effort to enforce a hard border overlooked the existence of porous boundaries and deeply interconnected communities that predate the concept of modern national identity. Along the Kenya–Somalia border, it functions mainly as a counterterrorism strategy. In Al-Fashaga, it serves broader state-building and economic objectives that reflect territorial expansionist objectives linked to the consolidation of authority over fertile and economically valuable land. This contrast indicates that securitization in African borderlands should not be understood as a uniform response to insecurity, but as a flexible political instrument used to pursue different objectives.

Informal Governance and the Marginalization of Borderland Communities

The Kenya–Somalia border exhibits a hybrid governance system, where formal state security structures coexist with resilient informal networks of trade, kinship, and mobility. Al-Fashaga on the other hand has undergone a shift toward predominantly formalized and militarized governance, in which informal institutions have been actively dismantled. In Kenya, security policy operates on a centralized model, with control managed from the national level. State control is exercised through a securitization model that largely dismisses nuanced local knowledge of social networks and movement patterns. This results in a structural disconnect since local insights into movement patterns and emerging threats are underutilized.

Along the Ethiopia–Sudan boundary, governance has transformed into a "checkpoint economy." Every 15 to 20 kilometres, there are roadblocks controlled by a combination of state forces and irregular militias. This has led to a phenomenon in which state authorities and local communities work in parallel or in direct opposition rather than through coordinated frameworks necessary to address regional insecurity. This border reflects a system where authority is enforced through coercion and extraction rather than negotiation.

Both areas experience a fragmented system of governance. Instead of collaborating with locals, the state exploits its presence to tax and control the movement of people, resulting in reduced intelligence sharing and mistrust. Whereas the Kenya–Somalia border represents a case in which informal and formal systems coexist but are poorly integrated, the border between Ethiopia and Sudan reflects governance replacement, where state militarization actively erases pre-existing local arrangements.

The Limits of State-Centric Security Approaches

Whereas securitization along the Kenya–Somalia border is partial and uneven, in Al-Fashaga and the Kurmuk region it is intensive and territorially assertive. Along the Kenya–Somalia border, the area was a designated as a no man's land for 15 years to help prevent al-Shabaab's advance. Despite this, the group managed to recover territory and bolster its strength. It adapted by lowering its visibility, diversifying its revenue sources, and embedding itself more deeply within cross-border economic networks. This trajectory highlights the limits of border closure as a security strategy. The central issue, therefore, is not whether borders should be open or closed but rather whether the state can regulate and legalize movement. Securitization is partial and uneven, making state control aspirational rather than fully realized, and the result has enabled al-Shabaab to adapt and embed themselves within local economies.

In contrast, securitization in Al-Fashaga and the Kurmuk region has broken down traditional livelihoods. In this case, securitization has transitioned from a territorial dispute into a land-grab. It is characterized by permanent military presence and systematic control of land and movement. The border has been transformed into a highly regulated zone of extraction and surveillance. The administrative vacuum, agricultural collapse, and destruction of trade have driven disenfranchised youth toward radicalization, as joining militias or engaging in smuggling becomes their only means of survival. These results demonstrate that security measures do not align with local socio-economic dynamics. By wrecking the local economy, the state inadvertently creates a recruitment pool for the insurgencies it aims to neutralize.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that although the drivers, governance structures, and implementation strategies differ, they converge in producing similar approach to border governance. Nevertheless, both cases reveal a broader limitation of state-centric border governance: the inability to conceptualize borders as lived spaces. Instead, borders are reduced to lines of control, detached from the socio-cultural exchanges, trade, and cooperation systems that sustain stability.

These cases further reveal that when state policy ignores the socio-economic realities of borderland communities, it does not achieve security. Rather, it replaces communal resilience with a militarized landscape where violence becomes an economic necessity. While securitization can vary in intensity, from fragmented enforcement to consolidated militarization, it ultimately produces instability when it fails to incorporate local socio-economic realities.

Summary

	Kenya–Somalia	**Ethiopia–Sudan (Al-Fashaga)**	**Comparative Analysis**
Driver of securitization	Counter-terrorism (al-Shabaab).	Territorial consolidation and resource competition.	Different motivations, but securitization is used as a political tool to strengthen state authority.
Governance model	Hybrid governance where formal security coexists with informal local networks.	Militarized governance replacing informal institutions.	Both weaken collaboration with local communities, though

			through different mechanisms.
Implementation	Partial and inconsistent (unfinished wall, porous border).	Intensive and comprehensive (military presence, checkpoints).	Securitization varies in intensity but remains state-centred in both cases.
Impact on communities	Disrupts cross-border livelihoods and reduces community trust.	Destroys livelihoods and encourages displacement and illicit activities.	Both undermine community resilience by ignoring local socio-economic realities.
Security Outcome	Al-Shabaab adapts despite border controls.	Militarization fuels instability and militia recruitment.	Neither approach delivers lasting security because both overlook the human dimensions of border governance.

Conclusion

This analysis illustrates that despite the unique contexts of the Kenya–Somalia and Ethiopia–Sudan borders there are similar approaches to border governance with both cases revealing the limitations of these state-centric interventions. By prioritizing territorial control over local realities, states undermine informal governance systems, disrupt livelihoods, weaken trust between communities and authorities, and create conditions that can perpetuate insecurity rather than resolve it.

The findings highlight the need for governance frameworks that move beyond state-centric approaches and formally incorporate informal social structures and systems. Chiefs, religious leaders, clan elders, and pastoralist networks possess localized knowledge that is often absent from centralized security strategies. Their participation in permanent cross-border dynamics would strengthen conflict mediation, improve intelligence sharing, and create greater community ownership of security initiatives. Rather than relying on ad hoc consultations, governments should establish sustainable governance structures anchored in the realities of borderland communities.

A broader shift is also required in how security is conceptualized and enforced. The evidence presented in this study suggests that sustainable security cannot be achieved through territorial enforcement alone. Policies should prioritize approaches that place livelihoods, mobility, and community welfare at the centre of border governance. Replacing blanket securitization measures and movement restrictions with community mobilization which would help address security threats while reducing the grievances that armed groups often exploit to build legitimacy.

The findings further demonstrate the importance of economic integration. Efforts to criminalize informal cross-border trade frequently undermine local livelihoods and encourage participation in illicit economies.

The adoption of Simplified Trade Regimes (STRs)[21], regulated trade corridors, and accessible customs systems in border hubs such as Mandera and Al-Fashaga would provide legal avenues for commerce while reducing incentives for smuggling. By separating economic regulation from security enforcement, states can reduce corruption, lower the costs of trade, and enable new streams of revenue collection.

Regional cooperation emerges as another critical requirement. Challenges such as al-Shabaab and the Ethiopia–Sudan border dispute cannot be effectively addressed through unilateral action. Borderlands must be understood as shared spaces that require collective management rather than as arenas of geopolitical competition.

Ultimately, long-term stability depends on addressing the historical and structural marginalization of borderland regions. Investments in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and economic opportunities are essential for strengthening state legitimacy and reducing dependence on illicit economies and. The cases examined in this study demonstrate that legitimacy is built through the consistent delivery of services and opportunities rather than projection of military force. Border governance should therefore move beyond containment and recognize mobility, trade, and social interaction as integral features of borderland life. Viewing borderlands as interconnected ecosystems rather than security liabilities offers a more sustainable path toward stability, development, and regional peace in the Horn of Africa.

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