

Nisar Majid

Jethro Norman

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Private Military and Security Companies in Somalia

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Source: Jethro Norman.

Bancroft, GardaWorld, and G4S are just a few of the Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) that have become familiar names to those of us working in insecure environments. The presence and embeddedness of these security contractors in volatile and violent contexts has become part of the character of international engagement, including in the countries where the CRP works. These actors are ostensibly in place to support the state-building and humanitarian engagement of (primarily) Western countries and the associated multi-lateral and non-governmental organisations in place on the ground. The influence of PMSCs has extended much beyond so-called fragile states, as well as into the wider orbit of non-governmental and humanitarian presence. A [2014 report](#) posed many difficult questions for the United Nations in its use of PMSCs, centred around the lack of actual or effective regulation of these organisations.

Dr Jethro Norman conducted multi-sited ethnographic research for his doctoral thesis amongst PMSCs and other transnational security professionals, across Kenya and in Somalia, and he recently produced a short research memo for the CRP, on [the role of PMSC's in Mogadishu](#), focusing on the period 2008 to late 2017. Norman has an interdisciplinary background and brings both a historical perspective as well as an intimate, insider knowledge to this sector.

The memo for the CRP draws on his time in Mogadishu and, following on from the 2014 Global Policy Forum report, continues to raise questions around regulation – or its absence and/or lack of enforcement. This tension, between the aim of international assistance in rebuilding national security institutions and the risk of perpetuating the expansion of local economies and the vested interests of those benefitting from the available security revenues, is deeply troubling.

PMSCs in Mogadishu, as elsewhere, utilise their security rationale to develop many other business projects where they operate. Norman framed his doctoral work against the political marketplace, a core

concept of the CRP, and finds that that these security firms, located within and around Mogadishu's green zone, *position themselves as 'gatekeepers' for the international community, and within a political marketplace for security services that is transactional rather than regulated.*

International PMSCs are of course only one aspect of the international community's presence and the stabilisation agenda in Somalia. They are also not the only example of commercialised politico-military activities occurring at the expense of the official stabilisation agenda. Nevertheless, they play an important role in operating at the interface between city-wide economies of protection and coercion and a global capitalist system that works to contain postcolonial populations at the margins of the international system. In this sense, according to Norman, PMSCs should not simply be seen as a substitute for state activities, or as an unintended effect of the failure of state-building. Rather, their role highlights the links between what we call the political marketplace in postcolonial peripheries and the current global variant of neoliberal capital which displays a similar tendency to work through transnational actors, displacing or (more appropriately) reconfiguring state power.

In addition, there is also a clear historical dimension to the role that PMSCs play in so-called stabilisation programs. The fusion of military, commercial and development aims, jargon and capacities that some contemporary PMSCs embody resonates with colonial strategies and ideologies of indirect rule. Here, order relied upon the co-option of 'local' elites and tended to involve a similarly messy constellation of actors that defied public/private, local/global dichotomies, and were often in competition with each other. Colonial rule was also often fragile and liable to manipulation through extraversion.

The research memo is available [here](#).

Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.

About the author



Nisar Majid

Dr Nisar Majid manages the Somalia country programme. He has worked in and on Somalia and the Somali territories of the Horn of Africa for over twenty years, in various applied research capacities.

This included his doctoral research which explored transnationalism in the Somali context.



Jethro Norman

Dr Jethro Norman completed his PhD in early 2020 at the University of Leeds and has recently started a post-doc programme at the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS). His current research broadly covers politics and development in Somalia and Somaliland, with a particular focus on transnationalism and the role of the Somali diaspora.

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