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To cite this article: Syed Nisar Majid (2022): Transborder Citizenship and Activism: Political Engagement and Resistance in the Somali Environment, Journal of Civil Society, DOI: [10.1080/17448689.2022.2068627](https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068627)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2022.2068627>



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Published online: 11 May 2022.



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Transborder Citizenship and Activism: Political Engagement and Resistance in the Somali Environment

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Somali transborder/transnational activism through the role of two individual actors, drawing upon their life histories and a selection of initiatives they have been involved in over time. The Somali-populated Horn of Africa provides a highly complex environment for the production of identities, based on its ethno-linguistic heritage, clan affiliations, Islam and their variable state-like affiliations in what is a highly politically fragmented context. These complex and multiple forms of identity incorporate diasporic and non-diasporic actors, all of which complicates notions of citizenship. This article draws upon social and cultural notions of citizenship (rather than legal-bureaucratic) to argue that the agency expressed by the two protagonists is usefully understood as a form of evolving transborder citizenship. Furthermore, the article utilizes the concept of 'social remittances' to suggest that the quality of behaviour expressed by our transborder citizens is a form of 'civicness', reflective of an engagement with and resistance to the volatile and exclusionary politics of conflict affected contexts. Utilizing life histories enables us to explore how individuals and the networks of which they are part, pursue different strategies, to varying effects, over time and in multiple settings. .

KEYWORDS

Somali; transborder citizenship; social remittances; civicness; life histories

Introduction

The Somali regions of the Horn of Africa provide a highly complex environment in terms of identities and their 'state' like affiliations. Common forms of identity, based on ethno-linguistic (Somali) and religious (Islam) characteristics are juxtaposed with deeply contested and divided identities reflecting the Somali lineage system, the legacy of conflict and a fragmented political context with its multiple 'state' boundaries. In this context, the idea and meaning of citizenship is complicated, additionally so by a pervasive transnationalism. I navigate this environment through the life histories of two Somali men. Abdi moved from the Somali-identified region of Ethiopia to Somalia in the late 1970s, as a young boy, as a result of the Ethiopia-Somalia War. He then moved on to the UK in the late 1980s. In recent years he has developed a community interest and

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activism, initially in and from his hometown in the UK, and later as he has increasingly travelled for work and personal reasons between Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and the UK. Ahmed, on the other hand, has moved within narrower geographic circles, forced to move from the Somalia capital, Mogadishu, in the early 1990s due to the civil war, to his clan territory in Gedo region of present-day Jubbaland. He worked for many years in Gedo, eventually leading a national NGO. He has largely moved across the Somalia-Kenya border area since he moved to Gedo, including to his new base in Nairobi, Kenya, where he has lived for some years as it offers protection and opportunities not available in the border region. Ahmed and Abdi are firmly located within the turbulent and violent political and migratory history of the Somali-speaking Horn of Africa, that links Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya. They have multiple forms of official identity and affiliation, Abdi as a British citizen and passport holder, with an Ethiopia ID card, but also deeply attached to Somalia where he spent many of his formative years. Ahmed has obtained a Kenyan passport in addition to the Somalia passport he had previously and is active in various fields, typically focused on Gedo region and Jubbaland, in and from Nairobi. These two protagonists, through their migratory history and 'civic' activism, presented in the life histories below, enable us to explore ideas of citizenship and 'civicness' within the Somali milieu.

The transnational turn in the social sciences has contributed to the revision of concepts and practices derived from a methodological nationalism, defined as the 'assumption that the nation/state/society is the natural social and political form of the modern world' (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, p. 301). The policy world has responded to these developments through, for example, the expansion of dual nationality, recognizing the multiple affiliations of immigrant populations and the complexity of assimilation paradigms.

Migrant and diaspora populations – or transmigrants (Glick Schiller & Fouron, 2001), where they are active across borders – through their local and transnational connections have been recognized for some time as intimately implicated in processes of global transformation (Held et al., 1999). Lyons and Mandaville explain that, while processes of globalization and transnationalization are pervasive, the political agency of such populations remain 'intensely focused on specific locations, nations, identities and issues' (2012, p. 2). Glick Schiller frames transmigrants as a social force 'reshaping the workings of legal domains in more than one state' (2005, p. 48), where that legal domain is in fact always a legally plural arena. Such a perspective is aligned with Lund's (2016) notion that the state is 'always in the making' and that citizenship provides a point of entry for analysing the ongoing relationship between the state (or other forms of public authority) and society. This paper builds upon the notion of plural legality and different conceptions of citizenship to explore the agency of individuals within a transnational or transborder environment.

The political and social ramifications of high levels of mobility and displacement have long been a feature of Somali scholarship; a nomadic culture and a long history of conflict and political turbulence have led to people fleeing or choosing to move to seek new opportunities and safe havens, with this mobility and its inherent physical separation typically associated with the maintenance of strong social ties (Horst, 2006; Lindley, 2010). This history has led to an unusually high proportion of the population living outside the borders of Somalia itself, evident today in the importance of financial and

social remittances to the economy and society in Somalia and across much of the Somali speaking regions of the Horn of Africa.¹ Hoehne argues that the Somali diaspora and their remittances are constitutive of a ‘state-logic’ that ‘focuses on fixed territories, boundaries, and social and economic exclusion’, and that is part of bottom-up processes of state-making in the Somali territories (2016, p. 1380). The relationship between different forms of identity and state formation is however complex and contested as is discussed further below. Some scholars, for example, argue that a pan-Somali identity, culture and ‘nation’ remains prevalent and can indeed co-exist within an environment of extreme political fragmentation and across multiple ‘state’ boundaries (Chonka & Healy, 2021).

The exclusivity that Hoehne articulates is manifest in the politics of identity and the workings of the political marketplace that together characterize the Somali territories. The political marketplace refers to a transactionary politics evident in the Horn of Africa (and elsewhere) where money and violence are used interchangeably in the pursuit of power, not to the exclusion of other factors but nevertheless as a dominant feature of the political environment (De Waal, 2015, p. 2019). In juxtaposition with this fragmented and politicized environment, this paper evokes the concept of civiness as an empirically observed reality where civiness refers to the ‘meanings and practices that sustain integrity, trust, civility, inclusion and dialogue, and non-violence’ (Kaldor, 2019). The research programme that this paper is located within identifies different forms of civiness. These include direct activism and protests, the behaviour of officials and citizens and the creation of safe spaces in conflict environments, distinguishing these forms of civiness from notions of civil society (Kaldor et al., 2020). As such, civiness may also be broadly understood as a form of resistance in highly politicized and violent environments. Lilya and Vinthagen point out that resistance takes place in many ways, being played out at the individual or group level, in local, national or transnational spaces, in organized or non-organized form and through violent or non-violent means; ‘It involves all that we recognize as culture, material settings and the very conditions of human existence, such as life and death’ (2018, p. 211). I argue that civiness is a quality of the social remittances – the ideas, values, norms and information – embodied and transmitted by the two protagonists whose life histories we explore below, and thereby is a character of their transborder citizenship.

The article draws upon the life histories of two Somali men and the long-standing relationship of the author to these two individuals, who have been part of my information and research networks for over ten years. Semi-structured interviews and open-ended discussions were conducted as part of the research for this paper, as well as knowledge and research gained from ongoing contact with these two actors over time including for my doctoral thesis.² While admittedly providing a limited sample, life histories offer a particular perspective to explore agency as it cuts across different arenas of action, framed by different contexts, and where successes and setbacks are revealed over a long time period. This perspective is productive as a means of exploring processes of transborder citizenship in their multi-layered and plural legal environments.

The LSE Conflict Research Programme (CRP), through its researchers are part of wide-ranging networks in the Somali-speaking Horn of Africa as well as in the Somali diaspora. Research and ongoing discussions within these networks allow core concepts of the programme, such as civiness and the political marketplace to be explored and

theorized; some interlocuters have themselves joined the political marketplace as political aspirants just as others, as in this paper, are positioned as civic activists.

The paper begins by exploring the conception of transborder citizenship, highlighting both state-centric and society-centric perspectives. This is followed by a discussion of citizenship and belonging in the Somali context, reflecting the variegated forms of public authority as well as the Somali history of migration. A number of vignettes from the two life histories are then presented, before a concluding discussion.

Transborder citizenship and social remittances

Notions and practices of citizenship provide a conceptual entry point for assessing the scope and constitution of political authority (Lund, 2016). Analysis of citizenship is broadly separated into what Fox (2005) characterizes as state-centric and society-centric perspectives, reflecting rights versus membership positionality; the former being more concerned with the legal-bureaucratic granting of rights by the state, while the latter is concerned with political membership and participation, or claims-making, by members of society. In practice, these distinctions are recognized to be different axes and emphases upon which citizenship is discussed; if rights and political membership are core concepts, citizenship is a relational notion, between citizens and the state and/or a political community (Fox, 2005, p. 175). Furthermore, claiming rights does not necessarily equate to those rights being enforceable. In other words, claiming rights is a necessary – but not sufficient – practice, that may result in gaining or claiming citizenship. Fox further argues that rights and empowerment can each encourage the other; ‘some must act like citizens (claim rights) so that others can actually be citizens (have rights)’ (Fox, 2005, p. 176).

Transborder citizenship is conceived as an extension of the national construction of rights and political inclusion. However, citizenship is not just a relationship or positionality vis-à-vis the state. Yuval-Davis frames citizenship as ‘a multi-layered construct in which one’s citizenship in collectivities – local, ethnic, national, state, cross or trans-state and supranational – is affected and often at least partly constructed by the relationships and positionings of each layer’ (1999, p. 119; in Fox, 2005). This multi-layered dimension brings attention to the plural legal world in which migrant and transmigrant populations are located, one where political practices and place-making take place in relation to different laws, norms and practices at the different layers in which they are embedded; the local, ethnic, state or other (Foblets, 2002).

Introducing notions of cultural and social citizenship provide alternative perspectives to their legal-bureaucratic counterpart. Cultural citizenship refers to ‘the right to be different with respect to the norms of the dominant national community, without compromising one’s right to belong’ (Rosaldo & Flores, 1997, p. 57), the right to wear the hijab being one such example. Cultural citizenship is therefore a perspective and practice that embodies both a critique of assimilationist practices of the nation-state and also acknowledges the plural legal environment in which migrants and transmigrants inhabit; they are derived from the demands of citizens to practice cultural norms. Social citizenship is a wider but related notion, concerned with the collective organization of people against, for example, discrimination, and its pursuit is argued to contribute to the development of state and society; ‘social citizens claim rights to citizenship substantively through social practice rather than law’ (Glick Schiller, 2005, p. 55).

Glick Schiller argues that transmigrants attempt to ‘construct forms of legal pluralism according to the different public authorities they engage with or encounter’ (2005, pp. 57–58), and that transborder citizenship ‘extends the cultural and social notions of citizenship to the transnational field’ (2005, p. 56). This view resonates with Lund’s (2016) argument for focusing attention on the social production of citizenship as part of understanding state-making in contexts otherwise described as failed, fragile or weak.

The notion of social remittances and social fields are helpful in locating actors and processes in a transnational or transborder context. In Levitt’s original evocation, social remittances are defined as the ‘ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital that flow from sending- to receiving countries’ (1998, p. 927). This definition was acknowledged to be multi-directional rather than the uni-directional movement originally inferred (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves, 2011). Levitt was keen to bring attention at the time to the understudied social impact of migration, given the bias towards financial flows or financial remittances.

Levitt (1998) argued that social remittances are a useful conceptual tool to aid understanding of the cultural dispersal taking place through increased global interconnectivity, distinguishing the personalized quality of such remittances from the more faceless, mass-produced ‘mediascapes’ and other types of flows (Appadurai, 1990). The creation of social remittances for Levitt (1998) is said to come from the blending of ideas and practices from migrants’ different cultural contexts and is influenced by their interpretative frameworks which are in turn a function of socio-economic status and opportunity structures. Levitt proposed different patterns of interaction of migrants in their host societies, from the more passive ‘recipient observers’ to the more pro-active ‘purposeful innovators’, the latter ‘who aggressively search for and selected new things’ in order to ‘get ahead rather than just survive’ (1998, p. 931). Levitt articulated 3 forms of social remittance: normative structures, being the ideas, values and beliefs of migrants, which may include ideas about organizational performance, such as for the church (or mosque), the state and courts; systems of practice, shaped by the normative structures and that include religious practices as well as civil and political behaviour; and social capital, an expression of position and status. These conceptual features usefully inform the nature and quality of our two protagonists and their agency.

Finally, social remittances are expressed within and through social fields which are defined as an ‘unbounded terrain of multiple interlocking egocentric networks’ (Glick Schiller, 2005, p. 50). A social field provides the conceptual space to explore how transmigrants are incorporated and active in multiple settings, in everyday forms of interaction with the state or in their local social and institutional environment as well as in more overt forms of political engagement.

Somali statehood, citizenship and belonging

Prior to independence the Somali territories were divided between Britain, Italy, Ethiopia and France. Somalia itself was created as an independent, post-colonial state in 1960, through the conjoining of British Somaliland (upon which contemporary Somaliland is based) and Italian Somalia. The remaining Somali territories were incorporated into Ethiopia, Kenya and Djibouti; a pan-Somali identity and ‘nationality’ was one of the manifestations of the end of the colonial era, given this division of territory (Samatar,

1992). This ethno-linguistic identity remains a prominent marker today and is evident in multiple forms, most notably in Somali language media (Chonka, 2017).

The administrative reach of the Somalia state, including in its role as a co-producer of identity and civic values was weak. Hoehne (2016) argues that patrilineal descent constitutes the primary form of belonging, superseding relations to land or territory, and is a function of the pastoral culture across much of the Somali territories.³ Elmi (2016), a Somali academic, appears to concur; In his discussion of citizenship in the Somali context, he argues that there are three main factors informing a Somali sense of identity and belonging: nationality, clan (patrilineal descent) and religion. In his evocation of nationality, however, this marker is not confined to the borders of a nation-state but to a pan-Somali, ethnic identity. Elmi states that clan membership rather than civic citizenship is indeed the more potent form of belonging. He attributes this to the lack of civic education under the Government of Siad Barre, in comparison to identities and norms associated with clan and religion, suggesting that the kinship system and the relations between different lineages are learned from childhood, and where widespread attendance at Islamic and Qoranic school has been more prevalent than other forms of education (Elmi, 2016).

It should be noted that the nature and significance of clan in Somali scholarship is deeply contested. The foundational work of the anthropologist I. M. Lewis, while important, is located in the structuralist school of anthropology with its fixed identities and has been heavily critiqued since for its application to explaining conflict and state collapse.⁴ The Somali segmented lineage structure is indeed known for its flexibility. Luling argues that Somali genealogy is in fact a 'sophisticated construct' with many contested relationships (2006, p. 474).

However, the period around the dissolution or disassembly of the state and civil war (1987-1992), is particularly important for understanding the manipulation (and concretization and militarization) of clan-based identities by political entrepreneurs (De Waal, 2020; Kapteijns, 2013). The legacy of this period and the clan-based narratives that were generated continues to inform contemporary society.

Clan identity and membership is however not inevitably exclusive. Hoehne (2016) emphasizes the 'network logic' that was pervasive prior to the civil war and state collapse, where relationships across clan and lineage fissures were commonplace. The hardening of identities in the late 1980s and early 1990s informs Hoehne's (2016) articulation of a more exclusive 'state logic' since then.

Following the demise of the state, the 30-year period since has seen the evolution of multiple forms of public authority, and with no central state or equivalent public authority. The most enduring political entities in this period have been Somaliland and Puntland, both inaugurated in the 1990s, the former currently existing as a *de facto* state, not yet internationally recognized, and the latter with a 22-year-old history as an autonomous, self-governing region (Bradbury, 2008; Hoehne, 2015, 2016). In both polities, public authority operates through a combination of official government figures, customary elders, religious leaders and business actors (Bradbury, 2008; Hoehne, 2015; Richards, 2014). While forms of 'national' identity and belonging are invoked in both cases, the role of clan identity in their social and political construction is also pervasive.

Other than these two polities, located in the northern regions of Somalia, public authority in the remainder of the country, has been much more fluid and unstable, and has included 'warlord' figures, militant Islamic groups, sharia'a courts and other localized

combinations of actors (Hagmann & Hoehne, 2009). More militant and conservative Islamist influences have also become more prominent in Somali society over the last 10–20 years, including in expressions of public authority. The most notable example of this was the amalgamation of local Islamic Courts in 2006, into the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), that together took control of much of southern and central Somalia for a period of about six months (Marchal, 2011). The rise of this Union reflected different factors, including a resistance to the more destructive aspects of clan-based identity politics and violence as well as pragmatic business interest concerned with controlling costs (Ahmad, 2015). Inevitably there are complex nuances both in intra-Islamic norms, as well as their interplay with clan identity, that are beyond the scope of this paper. The period of UIC dominance was ultimately short-lived and an Ethiopian-led attack led to its fragmentation and the rise of Al Shabaab, who have remained a pervasive force since.

The current federal government of Somalia was only internationally recognized in 2012 and is notionally comprised of six member states⁵; In practice, it includes five members states with Somaliland operating as a separate polity with ambitions of independence. While Puntland joined the federal arrangement as a pre-existing polity, the remaining four states were created between 2013 and 2016. Jubbaland, one of the six member states in Somalia, and of most relevance to the paper, was formed in 2013. Tensions between the centre of power in Mogadishu and the member states have been persistent over time, reflecting the emergent nature of the federal system. These tensions have been particularly destabilizing since the 2017 elections.⁶ While internationally recognized, this official governmental system has a very limited territorial reach, reliant on international military support for much of the territory it does hold as well as for its own protection. It has a limited taxation capacity and provides little in the way of public services. Nevertheless, in the public imagination, including through its assertion of sovereignty in international relations the state is a tangible actor. The militant Islamist group, Al Shabaab, remains a pervasive presence throughout much of southern and central Somalia, arguably controlling or having influence over a greater territory than the Government and its allies, while also operating an efficient taxation system (Hiraal Institute, 2020) and a credible justice system (Majid & Abdirahman, 2021).⁷

This fragmented history of Somali statehood brings attention to the wide range of public authorities and state imaginaries across the Somali speaking territories. As suggested by Elmi (2016), these practices and imaginaries of statehood are not strongly associated with a civic character or education, where instead lineage and religion are more powerful identifiers of belonging and security. The formal state of Somalia, historically and in its contemporary manifestation, is strongly associated with oppression, violence and economic exploitation. This also applies in the neighbouring states of Kenya and Ethiopia, where Somalis have long occupied a marginal status. The state is arguably seen in a much more pragmatic way, as a means of enabling mobility (through, for example, ownership of a passport) and to enable access to resources.

The global Somali diaspora dispersed over multiple states adds a further dimension to experiences and imaginaries of the state. Somalia (and Somaliland) today is described as a transnational state, with a significant proportion of the population living outside its national borders. Populations outside the country are said to live in the ‘near’ and ‘far’ diasporas; in neighbouring countries and the Middle East, as well as in Europe, the

UK, North America as well as elsewhere (Lindley, 2010). The influence of these actors is pervasive across society, politics and the economy.

Many members of this diaspora are more accurately conceptualized for their ongoing mobility, with Hansen (2009) coining the term ‘revolving return’, to reflect the continuous back and forth movement between the Somali territories and their new homes abroad, as people seek job and business opportunities and engage in politics. Hansen suggests, in the case of Somaliland, that these revolving returnees may play a ‘crucial role in establishing a civil society and raising issues relating to human rights, minority rights, good governance, the environment, and the position and role of women in the society’ ... due to their particular ‘skills, networks and money from the West...’ (2007, p. 138). It is of course the case that diaspora populations in the Horn of Africa, as elsewhere, are associated as much with the inflaming and perpetuation of conflict and political tensions as with their mitigation (Lyons & Mandaville, 2012). The civic space that Hansen alludes to for example, has been far more available in Somaliland than in other parts of the Somali-speaking Horn of Africa, as reflected in the vignettes below. Hammond provides a further discussion of the pervasive transnationalism, in Somaliland, with accounts of the different ways in which diasporic actors engage with an contribute to society and development as well as some of the tensions that are created with local populations (Hammond, 2015).

Somali public and social media is acknowledged for its role in co-producing the political fragmentation evident across the Horn of Africa (Isse-Salwe, 2006; Chonka, 2017, 2019b; Osman, 2018). There are innumerable websites and radio stations which represent narrow – typically clan – interests. However, as indicated above, digital media may in fact also contribute to the maintenance of an ethno-linguistically, religious and cultural ‘nation’ within a highly politically fragmented environment (Chonka and Healy, 2021).

Empirical findings – The case studies

The following section introduces two actors and a number of vignettes from their life histories. These life histories are located in relation to the varied forms of public authority evident in the Somali speaking Horn of Africa region as well as in a particular urban locality in the UK. While Somali scholarship has clearly identified a transnational agency across Somali politics and society there has been little discussion of this in terms of transmigrant or transborder citizenship; a life history methodology serves to illustrate the conceptual account of citizenship, as it is lived and performed against different forms of public authority.

Case Study 1: The Somalia-Kenya borderlands

Ahmed was born in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, in the 1960s where he undertook some of his primary education before moving to the town of Luuq, in Gedo region, in the present-day Federal Member State of Jubbaland. His father was a well-known religious figure, who worked for the Ministry of Justice (as an Islamically trained Sheikh). With the outbreak of the civil war, Ahmed initially worked as a small trader and businessman; his father had given him a small shop to run. The family soon moved from Luuq to

Belet Hawa, in the same region, moving them closer to both the Kenyan and Ethiopian borders, after the 'warlord' General Aideed took over Luuq in 1991.

Later, while in Belet Hawa, Ahmed joined an international NGO. He spoke some English and this allowed him to do some translation for the organization. He also mediated between the NGO and Al Itihad, a militant Islamist group active in this area briefly in the early 1990s.⁸ He found the group relatively easy to work with as they provided an order and services in the period immediately following state collapse. Ahmed had no previous background in formal employment or NGO work but explained one of his attributes as, 'I have that cosmopolitan background ... I can talk to everybody' (interview, January 2019). He describes his ability to maintain his neutrality and relations as helpful for his role in the organization, as he became responsible for the highly sensitive job of recruitment and staffing.⁹ The job ended in 1994, and he then formed a local NGO with two friends, which he has continued to lead up to today.

One of Ahmed's formative experiences centred around the discovery of a cartel that had formed between a prominent international NGO and a number of local political and business figures in this border area of Kenya and Somalia. The cartel was involved in controlling food aid contracts and Ahmed felt this was perpetuating local conflict as well as undermining the local economy and livelihoods.¹⁰ Ahmed challenged these actors publicly and this led to tensions with those he was accusing, who eventually conspired to have him arrested in Kenya on murder charges. A friend of Ahmed's was able to raise these issues in international aid coordination meetings in Nairobi and ultimately the NGO in question was forced to issue a statement exonerating him and the case was dropped.¹¹

This initial period gives some indication of Ahmed's early civic character, acting across cultural, ideological and organizational divides and challenging what he identified as unjust practices. It also highlights the dual and sometimes contradictory positionality of international aid as both offering possibilities for humanitarian action as well as being problematically incorporated into the political economy context.

Some years later, in the mid-2000s, Ahmed became involved in conflict mediation. He describes this as 'another turning point in my life' (interview, January 2019). He became part of a mediation group, which involved the Kenya Government and the then warlord figure, Barre Hirale, who controlled parts of Kismayo in present-day Jubbaland.¹² An internationally funded cross-border peace development process led to the creation of 'Peace Committees' along the Somalia-Kenya border, a period of interesting and well-documented peace-building initiatives in this area.¹³ Again, conflict mediation can be considered coterminous with values of civiness and suggests a wider recognition of Ahmed's values and status during this time.

Several years later, after the rise of the militant Islamist group, Al Shabaab, in Somalia, Ahmed became involved in further attempts at mediation on behalf of the NGO he leads, in the Gedo region. He initially attempted to work with the group, seeing some similarities with the positive experience he remembered from dealing with Al Itihad previously. However, he soon changed his position; he was also a board member of a local radio station at this time and this led to tensions with Al Shabaab over the content of programmes. Ahmed saw value in the use of radio, explaining that '*radio was about mobilising the community ... giving people a voice. One of the ways to end a conflict is to give people information. One of the ways to create a warlord or a big-man*

is to restrict information' (interview, January 2019). Ahmed moved between his NGO bases in Gedo region (in Jubbaland) and in Mandera, across the border in Kenya, for many years, where Mandera provided additional security and services. However, with the rise of Al Shabaab, he faced growing risks and eventually moved himself and his family to Nairobi.¹⁴

After Al Shabaab were later removed from areas of North Gedo, by Ethiopian forces, a new political figure emerged in the area, where Ahmed was again working with his NGO. This figure became powerful and co-opted the aid economy gaining a reputation for brutality. Officially, he became the local District Commissioner (DC) and later Jubbaland Security Minister but was also exposed for perpetrating various abuses.¹⁵ Ahmed's NGO was forced to move out of the area due to his unwillingness to abide by the terms imposed by the DC. He later contributed to exposing the abuses taking place under this regime, working closely with a United Nations investigatory body, helping to gather evidence and encouraging victims to speak out.

A final and recent vignette concerned Ahmed's involvement in the Jubbaland elections of August 2019. These elections were heavily contested by the incumbent President and the Federal government; clan narratives and identity politics were instrumentalized by competing groups.¹⁶ Following an increasingly tense build up to the elections, where the two main competing groups had failed to find terms for an agreed election process and with concerns rising about the threat of violence, Ahmed became involved in a new initiative which became known as the Jubbaland Dialogue Group for Peaceful, Free and Fair Elections in 2019.¹⁷ The initiative was led by two prominent political figures with good links to the leadership of both sides. Initially, the group kept a very low profile given the political sensitivities. The group met with and initially had the support of the President of Jubbaland. They produced a paper documenting their position and had access to international resources and mediation expertise if that was needed.¹⁸

This initiative was active for 3–4 months, with members of the group regularly meeting with different parties, including local elders, businesspeople and politicians, from both the Kenyan and Somalia sides of the border, where Kenyan state and kinship interests in Jubbaland are considerable. Meetings were generally held in Nairobi, including with people who were moving back and forth between the *de facto* capital of Jubbaland, Kismayo, and other parts of the state. However, the initiative was eventually put on hold and then abandoned as political space contracted and tensions increased. In the event, the election itself was widely discredited as the incumbent President used his security apparatus and the support of the Kenyan government to stage the elections, in order to counter the very real threats of direct intervention by the Federal Government itself; the election became an exemplar of the enactment of the political marketplace in Somalia.¹⁹

In ongoing conversations with Ahmed, including in the generation of this paper, he describes his motivations concerning these various vignettes as 'an obligation to do something ... something good. If I can contribute to the stability of Somalia, it must be done'. (interview, March 2019). This sentiment is echoed by Abdi below, and together constitutes an imperative to act including for the fear or guilt that might be felt later for having not done so. While he has learned and benefited from his involvement and connection with the aid world, as well as seen its own internal disfunctions and vested

interests, he has become increasingly frustrated with the aid economy, explaining that ‘if we remain in our comfort zone ... I could stay in my projects and stay in my NGO ... [but you] can’t do genuine things with NGOs’ (interview, March 2019).

Case Study 2: The UK to East Africa²⁰

Abdi was born in the Somali Regional State (SRS) of Ethiopia, in the 1960s, and displaced to Somalia as a result of the Ethiopia-Somalia war of 1977/78, when a young boy. Abdi is from a small, religiously identified clan, known to be more sedentary, urban and educated. Abdi explained that his clan have certain norms, discouraging members from engaging in violence or conflict.²¹ After moving to Somalia, Abdi grew up in Belet Weyn town (near the Somalia-Ethiopian border) and later in Mogadishu, attending school in both locations. He was then assisted by an uncle to move to the UK, when in his late teens, where he has lived since the late 1980s, obtaining an undergraduate degree and a Masters. Since 2015 he has been moving between Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia and the UK, for work and personal purposes.

After his initial career as a software programmer, in the UK, Abdi decided he would ‘rather work with people than with computers’ and became involved in local community initiatives. One of his earlier engagements involved influencing Somali-owned charitable organizations in his home-city in the UK, to become more inclusive and responsive to the entire local Somali population, rather than reflecting the identities and interests of the family to which they and their management were associated; teashops, restaurants, businesses and even local areas within cities are commonly identified with particular clan identities in the Somali social world (Majid, 2013). At a similar time, Abdi, with other friends founded a new mosque in his hometown in the UK, which involved considerable fund-raising locally and abroad. The premise behind the mosque was both to provide a safe place for women to socialize, where men have numerous options in the Somali tea and coffee shops in their localities but where women are rarely seen, as well as to provide a religious resource for the local Somali population in the area (Majid, 2013). The leadership of the mosque had formed good relations with the nearby church as part of their development. Through this initiative, Abdi was playing an important role in terms of place-making in the UK, resisting the identity-based affiliations and contributing to the development of different organizations – a charity and a mosque – based on principles of inclusion.

While involved in these local initiatives, major political changes were taking place in Abdi’s home region of Ethiopia, known for its violent and repressive past and insurgency and counter-insurgency operations between the ONLF (Ogaden National Liberation Front) and the Ethiopian state (Hagmann and Khalif, 2006; Hagmann & Korf, 2012). The ONLF dominated political discourse on the websites from this area, and Abdi and others wanted to create an alternative platform for dialogue, discussion and information sharing based on political and developmental changes that were taking place in the region but that were not prominent on ONLF sympathetic websites (Majid, 2013). They established a website and a name for themselves and quickly became noticed by the political elite from the region, some of whom were based in the UK, and were able to meet various prominent political figures.

While they achieved some success in promoting a different narrative into the public domain, the group was later disbanded in large part due to a member using his association with the group to attain favours upon his return to the region, a not uncommon practice and a known risk for those starting political or advocacy groups; the social or political capital gained through association with a group identity being later traded for favours. Some members of the group did continue their activities, focusing only on the website, although this brought threats of violence from the ONLF (Majid, 2013).

Later, Abdi, with some of the same members of the previous group became engaged in tensions that were developing between two Islamist militant groups, Hizbul Islam and Al Shabaab, in present-day Jubbaland prior to its formal incorporation as a Federal Member State.²² They had personal and clan links to Hizbul Islam and claimed to be trying to ensure the separation of the two groups, where they felt that Al Shabaab's agenda was by far the most dangerous.²³

A final vignette concerns Abdi's involvement in supporting a change of leadership in the Somali Regional State, Ethiopia, where, from 2009 to 2018 a brutal and repressive President, Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley' had gained hold utilizing with impunity a large paramilitary force (Hagmann, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2018). The President's regime came to totally dominate political space and economic resources within the region, until his arrest in August 2019 by a new Federal government (Hagmann, 2020). Abdi initially kept a low profile in relation to political advocacy towards his home region, due to the high risks involved.²⁴ However, the death of a friend's brother, allegedly ordered by the President, motivated him to engage more actively. His friend had formed a political party in exile and was resisting the President through social media. Abdi explained that 'he [his friend] needed a moral support' knowing that many people had been silenced due to the fear of reprisals. His friend eventually became the new President of the region.

With the support of a small international conflict mediation organization a group of individuals from Somali Region was convened on several occasions to brainstorm about the region's problems and ways forward, of which Abdi was a part. They eventually formed an informal group called 'samadoon' (seekers of goodness). Abdi continued to engage with and be called upon by these groups, as an advisor and participant.

While always a behind-the-scenes actor, Abdi explains that there are many difficulties in being involved in such activities, particularly where options for transformation are limited and the primary purpose of engagement is because 'I would feel bad if I did nothing' (interview, August 2019) when an opportunity for change arises. He also recognizes that attempting to influence change and work with others often leads to disappointment in terms of both the process and results, as individuals in emergent networks who appear to be like-minded may have different underlying agendas and meaningful or sustained changes are difficult to achieve.

Conclusion: Transborder Citizens as Civic Activists

Ahmed and Abdi are clearly located within the turbulent and violent political and migratory history of the Somali-speaking Horn of Africa; Abdi moving from Ethiopia to Somalia to the UK, and more recently travelling frequently within the Horn of Africa as well as between the region and the UK. His social activism is a more recent

development and started from the UK, including local and transnational initiatives. Ahmed has moved within a narrower geographic area, within Somalia and across the Somalia-Kenya border area, including to his new base in Nairobi, Kenya. Both actors have multiple forms of official identity as well as other affiliations. These multiple forms of identity and affiliation enable them both to maintain their mobility as well as extend their access to a variety of resources and networks.²⁵

Levitt's description of a 'purposeful innovator' as a characteristic of transnational migrants and their transborder agency and social remittances resonates with Ahmed and Abdi, who are both actively engaged with the normative structures and systems of practice in their Somali social and political worlds, in their different national (or 'state') contexts as well as through the various platforms and organizations of the international aid system. Abdi's voluntary work in his hometown in the UK has entailed navigating the legal-bureaucratic local context as well as the social and political dynamics within the local Somali community and wider third sector. He has contributed to the establishment of a well-respected charitable organization and a mosque, in his UK hometown, both significant acts of local place-making that additionally have transnational dimensions; Abdi's hometown has become an important hub for politicians and political aspirants in both Somaliland and Somalia. Ahmed, in his earlier days, was actively engaged in the Gedo region, where he lived and worked, directly confronting and negotiating with different forms of public authority, as well as in and from Mandera, Kenya, which has long been a base for NGOs working in Gedo. His familial attachment to these areas and his NGO have provided him with a rationale, resources and status to pursue his interests.

Both have also acted across borders, into the locales to which they are attached by different combinations of birth, residence, lineage as well as personal networks and affiliation. Abdi has been most active transnationally to the region of his birth, the Somali Regional State of Ethiopia, where his parents both still live, through a website and mobile telephony, and more recently from within the East African region. He is also actively engaged in political issues in Somalia. Ahmed has continued to be focused on the Gedo region and the nascent Jubbaland political project, both in and from Nairobi. Both have discovered how important Nairobi is to politics across the Somali regions of the Horn of Africa and have extended their networks and knowledge as well as influence through time spent there, including by accessing the platforms and organizations that are concerned with human rights, humanitarian accountability and conflict mitigation located there.

The concept of social remittances – ideas, behaviours, identities and social capital – and its transmission through transnational social fields provides a compelling framework to explore and understand the agency of the two actors. While diaspora populations are associated with a political engagement that may cause or perpetuate conflict or contribute to peace (Lyons & Mandaville, 2012), they are often portrayed as an identity group that remain in their distant setting – a form of methodological nationalism itself. The notion of transborder citizenship invites us to think about transnational engagement differently.

Furthermore, the dimensions of social remittances embodied and transmitted by Ahmed and Abdi can be described as a form of civicness, and therein as a quality of transborder citizenship. Where Hoehne argues that processes of territorialization are drawing together identity, territory and resources in a vertical logic that runs counter to a cross-

clan network logic, and where Somali social media and websites are dominated by a similar logic, Abdi and Ahmed's actions appear to be undergirded by an interest in inclusivity and justice. While the stated motivations of Abdi and Ahmed should be treated with caution, as they may include ego-centric, self-interested dimensions, they perhaps allude to the complexity of a pan-Somali civic agency, that cuts across but also engages with local and international political boundaries. This perspective is also evident through book fairs and cultural events that take place in the country (Chonka, 2017, 2019a) as well as in some forms of humanitarian engagement practiced by the Somali diaspora (Maxwell & Majid, 2016). It provides a contrast with the clan-based tensions and fragmentation at the political elite level and in terms of the evolution of the federal government system (Dahir & Ali, 2021).

The transborder citizenship and resistance reflected through these life histories – as a lived experience – is processual and accompanied by both successes and failures. Returning to Yuval-Davis (1999) framing of the multi-layered construction of citizenship, clearly Ahmed and Abdi are expressing forms of social and cultural transborder citizenship, beyond merely the legal-bureaucratic but, as Fox (2005) suggests, it remains meaningful and important to act like a citizen so that others can be citizens, maintaining and circulating civic values, pursuing social justice and resisting violence and the politicization of identities.

Finally, what does this imply for the role of academic research programmes such as the LSE-CRP? Through its researchers, the CRPhas become part of the social networks of the two protagonists of this paper, exchanging information and ideas, and providing encouragement and connections on a range of issues. Individuals such as Ahmed and Abdi are role models and mentors for civic-minded actors and processes. They provide critical perspectives on both Somali society and politics as well as on the role that international engagement plays in perpetuating these dynamics, as well as in resisting them. They are arguably under-consulted and under-appreciated as advisors to policy and practice in the Somali regions. Academic institutions and research programmes can, in principle, offer a vital platform to encourage and support such actors and bring their insights and experiences into the public and policy domain.

Notes

1. While this general depiction is the case there are significant geographic and identity-based differences in the degree of transnational connections across this vast area (Majid et al., 2018).
2. Life histories are commonly used as part of ethnographic studies and consist of in-depth interviews and conversations. They are treated as social constructions that require further investigation and re-interpretation, see: Ellen, 1984.
3. The pervasiveness of a pastoral culture is contested; in particular in certain areas and peoples of southern Somalia more sedentary and agricultural livelihoods and cultures are present (Helander, 1986).
4. The exchanges between Besteman and Lewis being particularly heated (Besteman, 1998; Lewis, 1998).
5. Somaliland is notionally one of the federal member states but rejects membership of the federal system and continues to pursue international recognition.
6. A detailed discussion of these dynamics is available in Majid et. al. (2021).

7. The 4.5 clan-based formula for power-sharing refers to the 4 major clan families – the Dir, Darod, Hawiye and Digil-Mirifle – and a cluster of minority groups.
8. See Le Sage, 2004, for an explanation of Al Itihad during this period.
9. Staff recruitment and firing is extremely sensitive within the aid sector in Somalia and if badly managed can lead to violence.
10. The manipulation of aid including food aid has a long history in Somalia (De Waal, 1994; Jaspars et al., 2020).
11. International aid programmes in Somalia have long operated from across the border, in Kenya.
12. Hirale has a long history in present-day Jubaland, (see: Hassan & Barnes, 2007).
13. The late peace activist Dekha Ibrahim attained international recognition at this time (Berley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, 2010).
14. Al Shabaab has targeted and killed many humanitarian agency staff (Jackson & Aynte, 2013)
15. Amnesty International (2019).
16. ICG, 2020.
17. LSE Conflict Research Programme (2019), internal research memo.
18. A paper entitled, '*We are Jubaland Somalia. Together, We Hold Peaceful, Free and Fair Elections in 2019 Together, We Build Our Home and Our People Together, We Build a Better Somalia.*' was developed, under the title of the 'Jubaland Dialogue Initiative for Peaceful, Free and Fair Elections in 2019'.
19. ICG, 2020.
20. This life history draws on interviews for this paper as well as the doctoral thesis of the author.
21. Abdi refers to a story when he was a young boy, where a group of boys were throwing stones at someone else, and he was castigated by another member of his clan and told that people from his clan should not behave like that.
22. The current Jubbaland President was a leader within the militant Islamist group, Hizbul Islam, in this period.
23. There are close links between certain clans in Somali Regional State, Ethiopia, and the Somalia-Kenya border area due to long established processes of migration.
24. The Abdi Mohamed Omar 'Iley' influence and associated intimidation was known to extend to diaspora contexts, and Abdi had family in the Somali Region of Ethiopia who were potentially vulnerable to coercion by 'Iley'.
25. Nairobi is a particularly important hub in terms of both Somali-speaking networks as well as for the numerous international aid-related organisations that maintain regional and (Somalia) country offices there.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the contributions and encouragement of both Henry Radice and Mary Kaldor, as well as for the valuable input of the anonymous reviewer of this article. I am also extremely thankful to the innumerable people that have contributed to this article through the discussions and conversations that lie behind this work.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by DFID: [Grant Number GB-1-204428].

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