Mogadishu has gained a reputation as the most dangerous city in the world. Since the fall of Mohammed Siyad Barre in 1991 different factions have been locked in deadly competition to control it.

Numerous attempts have been made to establish an administration for Mogadishu and its surroundings – the ‘Benadir region’. From short-lived political deals between faction leaders based on asset sharing, to major community initiatives to restore local level stability, none have been able to deliver basic security let alone offer public services.

The complexity of Mogadishu stems from the perception of it being the political centre of Somalia, compounded by controversy over its future status: is it the capital city of the Somali nation or a clan city? Is it one of the regions of Somalia or does it need special status as a union territory belonging to all Somalis, regardless of their region or clan?

The enduring national symbolism of Mogadishu as Somalia’s capital ups the stakes for its control. Successive governments have fought unsuccessfully to establish themselves, just as Al Shabaab and Hisbal Islamiyaiya are doing today. With a multiplicity of actors involved in deciding Mogadishu’s fate, the establishment of an effective Benadir administration remains as elusive as ever.

The division of Mogadishu
Attempts to establish a Benadir administration started immediately after the fall of Siyad Barre in 1991. The breakup into two warring factions of the United Somali Congress (USC), the dominant political group in Mogadishu at that time, led to a hugely destructive four-month war.

A ‘greenline’ was established that divided Mogadishu between the north, controlled by interim President Ali Mahdi, and the south, controlled by his arch opponent General Mohamed Farah Aideed. Militia checkpoints were erected at junctions linking the two parts of the city, since when it has remained divided into enclaves.

The war changed the social character as well as the physical fabric of Mogadishu. Many of the original inhabitants left and were replaced by people from the regions. Traditions of peace and security were lost and many historic buildings were destroyed.

The Cairo national reconciliation conference of 1997 was a turning point for Mogadishu. Ali Mahdi and Huseein Aideed, who had succeeded his late father General Aideed, agreed to establish a new Benadir administration, which was launched in August 1998 based on a power sharing deal between the two. Public participation was limited but the business community was supportive of the new administration, investing more than $500,000 in it. It also received $800,000 from Libya. Three thousand police officers were trained and factions and clans provided them with weapons such as ‘battlewagons’.

Ultimately, the new administration failed due to fresh divisions in the leadership. Two important faction leaders, Muse Sudi (a deputy of Ali Mahdi) and Osman Atto (a rival to Aideed) opposed the administration. The number of factions in the
city doubled as these new leaders established bases and assembled militias to stake their claim to power.

The Arta reconciliation process of 2000 was the first Somali peace initiative since 1991 to form a parliament and elect a president. Immediately after relocation to Mogadishu, the new government appointed a governor, Ali Ugas Abdule, and a mayor, Abdullahi Muse Hussein.

Armed factions in Mogadishu that had not participated in the Arta process opposed these appointments. But instead of emphasizing reconciliation with the armed factions and providing space for people to participate in the formation of the administration, the government merely changed the leadership. Between 2000 and 2004 the Arta government appointed three separate mayors and governors, all of whom failed to live up to public expectations.

**Mogadishu Security and Stabilization Plan**

The Somali government formed in Mbagathi in Kenya in October 2004 could not agree on whether to relocate to Mogadishu, where the new president, Abdulahi Yusuf, was not popular. Even before it had left Kenya, Mogadishu was a divisive issue for the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), with some of the top leadership claiming that the city had to be cleared of opposition forces before it could relocate there.

President Yusuf opted for a temporary base first in Jowhar and later in Baidoa. He also called for the deployment of a large African Union peacekeeping force to support his administration, an idea abhorred by many in Mogadishu.

A group of parliamentarians and cabinet members led by the new speaker, Sharif Hassan Sheikh Aden, went to Mogadishu in March 2005 to prove to the government that it could relocate there. They challenged the inhabitants of Benadir to participate in the formation of a new administration.

Consultations led by civil society and business communities resulted in an agreement to form a technical committee to propose a way forward for the Benadir region. After two months of intensive dialogue, the Mogadishu Security and Stabilization Plan (MSSP) was produced. The plan emphasized two main needs – the pacification of the city and establishment of a regional administration.

The MSSP initially focused on security issues in order to assist in the formation of an administration that would enable the new government to function in the capital. The major components of the plan were: 1) dismantling all roadblocks in the city; 2) cantoning armed militia outside the city; 3) selecting a local council to elect a governor; and 4) establishing the administration’s executive branch, the police and the judiciary.

The plan was strongly supported by key actors and opinion formers in Mogadishu. Civil society and the business community embarked on fundraising and building public support. The media launched an extensive awareness-raising campaign, while civil society institutions provided neutral discussion forums to develop consensus.

One such forum brought together two former presidents, the speaker, parliamentarians, the deputy prime minister and seven
Is Mogadishu the capital city of the Somali nation or a clan city? Is it one of the regions of Somalia or does it need special status as a union territory belonging to all Somalis, regardless of their region or clan?”

ministers of the TFG, along with prominent civil society leaders – including women’s groups, and the business and religious leaders of Mogadishu.

The event was broadcast live on many local FM radio stations and produced a joint declaration endorsing the MSSP. It called for the removal of all roadblocks inside and outside the city; highlighted the importance of civil society participation in the implementation of the plan; and urged TFG institutions to take over the work.

Major steps in the plan were implemented. Most roadblocks were removed, militias were cantoned and a seven-member committee, mainly of parliamentarians, was appointed to finalize the formation of the administration. In December 2005 the committee agreed to nominate a 64-member regional council for Benadir. Hawiye sub-clans were well represented but other regions and clans were also included.

As the process evolved the support of the TFG group in the city began to erode. This group preferred to nominate the council as well as the governor and his team on the principle of power sharing, rather than allowing an appointed council to elect the governor as the committee had proposed. As a result some of the TFG members withdrew their support, resulting in another failure.

The story of the MSSP provides a very good example of the hidden legacy of the wars in Mogadishu and the lasting polarization that resulted. Mogadishu politicians were seriously challenged as to whether they could pacify their city and the very people they represented. The experience showed they were unable to make the concessions needed to form an interim administration and proved that Mogadishu politicians and their supporters were not yet ready to address this challenge positively due to abiding distrust between them.

Civil society leaders in Mogadishu had no option but to support whatever initiative came from the politicians. They hoped that the successful formation of an administration would achieve the local reconciliation needed for sustainable peace. Civil society groups made a significant contribution towards the implementation of the MSSP, including raising funds and awareness. Civil society and the business community financially maintained around 700 clan militia (not including Islamic Courts militia) in camps until February 2006. After that the militia left the camps due to the failure of the politicians to agree on the new administration.

Many people in Mogadishu argue that the formation of the Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism on 18 February 2006, an alliance of warlords, was a direct result of the failed MSSP project. Others argue that the warlords withdrew their support from the MSSP as part of a broader global agenda within the ‘war on terror’, backed by the US government. The immediate impact was the emergence of the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) and their takeover in early 2006 of Mogadishu and most of the regions in south central Somalia.

The Islamic Courts Union
The ICU was a conglomeration of clan and lineage courts, originally formed to deal with the pervasive security threats that plagued Mogadishu and its environs. Neighbourhood watch schemes had improved security in certain quarters of the city, but the challenge of how to deal with criminals once in custody remained.

Local clans and associated businesspeople supported the establishment of numerous Islamic courts in different areas of Mogadishu, which acted as the judicial wing of the neighbourhood watches. As the courts received more financial and technical support, they took over the watches and assimilated most of their members into their security forces.

Like the clans, the courts only united when they felt threatened by faction leaders who claimed to be hunting terrorist operatives hiding in Mogadishu under the auspices of Islamist groups. When the ICU took over Mogadishu, the first thing they addressed was security on the streets. This broadened their popular support.

Civil society and business communities welcomed the security brought by the ICU and encouraged them to prioritize establishing an administration for Benadir, so that the long awaited dream of the people in Mogadishu could be realized. The ICU appointed a committee comprising their supporters and members of civil society to propose a way to establish the administration.

The committee suggested that the administration should be set up through a participatory process, involving all actors and stakeholders in a congress to be called ‘The Congress for the Fate of Benadir’. The committee presented their proposal to the ICU executive committee, setting out 1) the objectives and expected outcomes of the congress; 2) modalities for participation and participants; 3) venue and time; and 4) the proposed structure of the new administration.
After the committee’s presentation there was a tough question and answer session on what they meant on each point of the proposal. The ICU thanked the committee and promised to study the proposal and decide the way forward. This promise was never fulfilled. Besides presenting their proposals, many civic actors preferred the reinvigoration of the existing council (established under the auspices of the MSSP) by the addition of new members and some adjustments in the executive branch.

The ICU neither modified the existing structures nor established new ones before the Ethiopian occupation of Mogadishu in December 2006. Instead, the ICU focused primarily on security and justice: arresting and trying criminals, rather than forming a political administration. They were also pre-occupied by events on other fronts such as expanding their influence, their contest with the TFG and the subsequent intervention by Ethiopia, all of which happened within six months.

**Relocation of the government to Mogadishu**

The TFG did not recognize the efforts of the speaker and other parliamentarians in developing the MSSP. In 2005 the TFG Prime Minister, Professor Ali Mohamed Geddi, had appointed Mohamoud Hassan Ali (Adde Gabow) as mayor-governor for Mogadishu, but he was largely ineffective.

It was not until the Ethiopian forces ejected the ICU from Mogadishu in December 2006 that the TFG relocated to the capital for the first time. In April 2007 Prime Minister Geddi created a new security structure for the city. He appointed a new mayor-governor, Mohamed Omar Habeber (Mohamed Dhere), who was a former warlord and governor of Middle Shabelle region.

At this time Mogadishu was the scene of intense fighting between the TFG and Ethiopia against an ICU-led insurgency. The violence divided the city along new boundaries and even affected areas that had not been touched by the fighting in 1991.

The 2007-08 war was very intense and destructive due to the use of heavy weapons, and it resulted in the displacement of nearly one million people. Mayor-Governor Mohamed Dhere did nothing to prevent this and was an avid supporter of the war. He was eventually sacked in July 2008 by the TFG’s second Prime Minister, Nur Hassan Hussein (Nur Adde), who had entered into dialogue with opposition forces. Mohamed Dhere tried hard to retain his position, which meant that Mogadishu’s administration became a major cause of contention between the president and the new prime minister.

The prime minister insisted on following the procedure laid down in the Transitional Federal Charter and in November 2008 around 70 district councilors from Mogadishu elected Mohamed Osman Ali ‘Dhagahtur’ as the new mayor-governor of the city.

**Looking forward**

None of the administrations established by the TFG for Benadir and Mogadishu have been able to deliver even minimum basic services to the people. The reasons for this failure lie in the approach used to make appointments, the affects of the war between the insurgents and the Ethiopian forces and the conflict within the top leadership of the TFG. The ongoing fighting between the TFG and the two Islamist opposition groups, Al Shabaab and Hisbal Islamiyiyayi, is bound to delay the long-awaited dream to stabilize the city.

Mogadishu has never experienced a fully-fledged reconciliation process to restore lost trust and heal the bitter memories of the past among the people. Civic actors in Mogadishu have advocated local reconciliation between the supporters of the factions that have fought over and divided the city.

Although the greenline was abolished a long time ago, there is still a psychological partition in many parts of the city. Mogadishu continues to host one of the most gruesome conflicts in history and war still haunts the memory of many ordinary citizens. This polarization is one of the hidden reasons for the failure of all the attempts made in the last 19 years to form an administration.

Article 5 of the Transitional Federal Charter adopted in Kenya in 2004 states that Mogadishu will be given a special status once the federal system is implemented. The parliament still has to define this in order to protect the city’s diversity and symbolism, its economic power and national political standing. Because of its troubled history, ongoing bloodshed and the ungovernable situation, for many of Mogadishu’s residents this cannot come soon enough.

In 1999 Hassan Sheikh co-founded the Somali Institute of Management and Administration Development (SIMAD). He joined the Center for Research and Dialogue (CRD) in 2001 as a researcher and later research coordinator and led the formation of the Somali Civil Society Forum in 2005 – a conglomerate of networks, coalitions and action groups. In 2006 he co-founded the Somali Research and Education Network (SomaliREN), and since 2007 has worked as a consultant with various international and local organizations, including UNDP and UNICEF.