

Has Al-Shabaab Exacerbated the Resurgence of Piracy in the Horn of Africa?

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2018 Cambridge Security Initiative (CSI)

Abstract

The al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist group, al-Shabaab, has contributed to the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa as the terrorist group seeks business relationships with Somali pirates. Al-Shabaab has sought such relationships in an effort to replenish weapons, fighters, and cash as they continue to meet significant resistance by the U.S.-backed Somali military in a fight to hold territory. Piracy peaked in 2011 with 237 attacks off the coast of Somali and followed by six quiet years with little activity, until there was a resurgence in 2017 with 54 attacks, doubling in one year, and costing the global shipping business \$1.4 billion.¹ Shipping companies contributed to the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa because they got overconfident after several quiet years and started engaging in riskier maritime navigation. These risks included traveling closer to the Somali coastline and dropping their travel speeds in an effort to save money on fuel costs. The aforementioned increased risks provided a permissive environment for piracy networks to zone in on these often-vulnerable vessels and launch pirate attacks. Vessels that choose riskier navigation practices haven't always been abreast of the latest developments and or incident reports of piracy throughout their routes. Nonetheless, they're often aware that they should maintain cruising speeds of greater than 18 knots as there are no documented incidents of a ship getting hijacked while maintaining the aforementioned speed.² This further validates that when shipping vessels engage in riskier navigation to reduce costs, whether sailing closer to hostel areas or decreasing their navigation speeds, they're willingly making themselves more vulnerable to being hijacked. During the peak years of Somali piracy, the Combined Maritime Forces (CMT) created CTF 151, which was one of three multinational task forces focusing on maritime security.³ CTF 151 explicitly conducted counter-piracy operations by engaging pirates and thwarting their attacks on vulnerable vessels. These defensive measures were successful and contributed to the lowest level of piracy in years.⁴ On November 17 and 18, 2017, Somali pirates attacked two vessels. The Italian Navy quickly responded by apprehending six pirates and seizing their vessels after a brief engagement.⁵ The outcome of this incident demonstrated how the multinational maritime security responses are as effective now as they were in the past.

Literature Review

Prior studies have identified the allure of piracy being driven by an opportunistic culture derived from a deep-rooted history of detest towards foreign trawlers who have frequently engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing throughout the waters in the Horn of Africa.⁶ Unlicensed foreign fishing vessels have contributed to overharvesting the waters and devastating local coastal communities. There have been very few studies examining how al-Shabaab has exacerbated the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa. It's evident that piracy has become a modern phenomenon in the Horn of Africa as many of the people have nothing and are desperate to preserve their livelihoods.

Piracy reemerged in the Horn of Africa in early 2017 following the first successful hijacking of a large commercial ship in five years. The pirates who captured the UAE oil tanker on March 13, 2017 were also fishermen who claimed that their equipment was destroyed by illegal foreign fishing vessels.⁷ This particular incident further supports that local fishermen will resort to piracy when they feel that their livelihoods are at risk.⁸ Shortly after, pirates captured a Pakistani vessel carrying food off the coast of Somalia. These hijackings illustrate that piracy has returned with a vengeance after several of quiet years. The decline in piracy was largely contributed to the improved navel patrols that were spearheaded by the international community along with shipping vessels being vigilant with their navigation procedures in the Horn of Africa. In 2008, the European Union (EU) deployed its first

European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) to the Somali coast and set the precedent for multinational maritime security collaborative responses such as the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF)'s Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) and NATO's Operation Ocean Shield.⁹ All three of these programs were deemed a success in combating piracy in the Horn of Africa. Another viable response that effectively suppressed piracy was the usage of private security contractors (PSCs) on board vessels to protect them from pirate attacks.¹⁰ The Horn of Africa is once again engulfed by a number of maritime insecurity dilemmas ranging from socio-economic underdevelopment and constraints to security concerns throughout the region.¹¹

It has been argued in studies that al-Shabaab has adequately cemented themselves in Somalia and that their only legitimate challenger is the Islamic State.¹² Furthermore, al-Shabaab has struggled to hold territory as they've encountered significant resistance by the US-backed Somali military. In an effort to combat the increasing resistance to diminish their stronghold in Somalia, al-Shabaab has established business partnerships with local pirate groups to assist them by trafficking weapons, fighters, and cash across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen. This unique partnership has reignited the interest in piracy as al-Shabaab is creating new business opportunities for the struggling local coastal communities and the pirates are replenishing the terrorist group with the means to stay in the fight against their adversaries. Examining how al-Shabaab has exacerbated the resurgence of piracy will fill in a void that presently exists regarding limited availability of studies on the aforementioned.

The History of Piracy in The Horn of Africa

Somalia's northeastern state of Puntland became the epicenter of the piracy crisis from 2007 through 2012. During the peak years of piracy in the Horn of Africa, Somali pirates earned upwards of \$400 million for their often risky, yet successful hijackings.¹³ Piracy in the Horn of Africa peaked in 2011 when Somali pirates attacked 237 vessels and seized 11 of them along with 216 hostages. The Somali pirates were handsomely awarded for their efforts as they earned on average more than \$2 million for every ship seized.¹⁴

Local fishermen were angry at trawlers from around the world who were engaging in illegal and unregulated fishing throughout the plentiful waters that are rich with large schools of tuna migrating along the east coast of Africa.¹⁵ The illegal and unregulated fishing that was left unchecked basically triggered local fishermen to organize and act against the foreign trawlers as nothing was being done to confront this escalating problem.

While the original intent of the pirates was to take a stance against those who were infringing upon their livelihoods, they quickly realized that piracy was not only a combative strategy against unwelcomed fishermen, but also an astronomical source of income and a slice of profit from international trade, which has largely circumvented Somalia for years. Former fishermen and entrepreneurs who resorted to piracy became millionaires such as in the case of Saeed Yare, who quickly amassed \$2.4 million from ransoms in 2010.¹⁶ Nonetheless, most Somali pirates often earned less than one percent of the ransom received from a successfully hijacking. The financiers and warlords were the real beneficiaries as they received up to 75 percent of the ransom.¹⁷ Pirates were also lured into the fast life as they squandered their earnings on drugs, prostitutes, and real estate. Some pirates found additional financial success by investing in khat, a narcotic stimulant popular in the region and among militiamen as seen widely used during the Battle of Mogadishu.¹⁸ While piracy is a lucrative endeavor for some, it has turned into a

nightmare for the international community as it costs the global economy \$18 billion a year in increased trade expenses.¹⁹

The international community has estimated that between \$339 million and \$413 million was paid in ransoms off the Somali coast during the peak years of piracy and the average haul was \$2.7 million. The average pirate earned between \$30,000 and \$75,000. Furthermore, pirates were also awarded bonuses up to \$10,000 for being the first man to board a hijacked ship and unspecified amounts for supplying their own equipment.²⁰

Somali piracy came to a halt between 2011 and 2017 as a result of a massive international naval presence along with armed security aboard vessels that navigated around the Horn of Africa. Ship owners were also denying ransoms to pirates who successfully seized vessels.²¹ The aforementioned combative methods created a deterrence to pirate organizations conspiring to engage in piracy in the Horn of Africa and suppressed hijacking attempts.

The Puntland fishermen are once again dealing with a momentous period of illegal, unregulated and underreported fishing throughout the region. An enormous international naval presence off the coast of Somalia and the operations of the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF) haven't appeared to be much of a deterrence to those seeking financial gain throughout the plentiful waters surrounding the Horn of Africa. The Puntland fishermen are also faced with the presence of al-Shabaab operating throughout the region, who pose a far more complex and dangerous threat to their community.²²

Al-Shabaab in the Horn of Africa

Al-Shabaab established itself as the radical youth wing of Somalia's now-defunct Islamic Courts Union (ICU) who were founded in 2006 and once controlled the Somali capital of Mogadishu.²³ The terrorist group has remained an everlasting threat to the region as they continue to launch coordinated attacks on hotels, military installations and the general populations in Somalia and Kenya. Furthermore, al-Shabaab is well-funded by powerful charities and individuals who have interest in the region.²⁴ Moreover, al-Shabaab has generated revenue through extortion, economic blockades, illicit trade, heroin smuggling, hijacking humanitarian aid, kidnapping, piracy, and shady business dealings with Dahabshil, an international money transfer company headquartered in Dubai and the largest of its kind in Africa. This company has been sued for aiding al-Shabaab and suspended by Kenya following the Garissa University College massacre on April 2, 2015.²⁵ After losing their control of the Kismayo port and Bakara market in Mogadishu which generated up to \$110 million in annual revenue, al-Shabaab created their own Ministry of Finance known as the Maktabatu Maaliya, which spearheaded the partnership with Dahabshil for services it provides in the regions it commands.²⁶

The current volatility and future uncertainty of the region has created opportunities for al-Shabaab to flourish. The escalating conflict in Yemen has allowed rival affiliates of the Islamic State, such as al-Shabaab, to seize territory and execute attacks in the countries that surround the Gulf of Aden.²⁷ There's a great deal of uncertainty on the future of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) after May 2019.²⁸ AMISOM has been fighting al-Shabaab for ten years and are now training local police forces to continue the fight. Somalia has become a nation without an army largely contributed to the fundamentally flawed international intervention and incompetent local leadership.

Maritime Security Operations (MSO) in the Horn of Africa

Somalia's 1,879-mile coastline is a challenge to patrol due to its massive size and has created many of challenges for the international community, especially when it comes to combating piracy in the Horn of Africa. To address these challenges, the international community established three major Maritime Security Operations (MSO).

The EU Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Somalia, also known as Operation Atalanta, was the first multinational maritime security response to combat piracy. This program was launched on December 8, 2008 with the objective to deter, disrupt and repress acts of piracy off the coast of Somalia. On November 25, 2016, the European Council extended Operation Atalanta's mandate to combat piracy in the Horn of Africa through 2018.²⁹ This decision was based on the past successes of the program along with the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa. EU NAVFOR has continued to prove its relevance in combating piracy after a successful operation by the Italian Navy in thwarting separate attacks on a container ship and fishing vessel in the Southern Somali Basin.³⁰

In January 2009, the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) established Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151). This program included a specific piracy mission-based mandate and has since been expanded to conduct broader maritime security operations. In February 2018, Combined Task Force 151 (CTF 151) successfully completed Operation HAMAD, which focused on suppressing piracy in the Socotra Gap, the Somali Coast and the Gulf of Aden.³¹

On August 9, 2009, NATO implemented Operation Ocean Shield, which was NATO's response to the escalating piracy threat in the Horn of Africa. The program's objective was to deter and disrupt piracy through allied collaboration. NATO's Operation Ocean Shield was declared "mission accomplished" and terminated on December 15, 2016. Three months later, two ships were hijacked within two weeks near the coast of Somalia.³² The dissemblance of NATO's Operation Ocean Shield could have opened the door to the resurgence of piracy as it decreased the presence of naval forces in the Horn of Africa.

In addition to multinational maritime security operations, private security contractors (PSCs) have become an asset to shipping companies as they've proven to be a viable defensive measure against pirate attacks. The use of private security contractors (PSCs) has been considered the most significant development in maritime security since the peak of piracy in the Horn of Africa.³³ Private security contractors (PSCs) have continued to be an instrumental force in combating piracy, such as when they thwarted an attack on the Singaporean MT Leopard Sun who was fired upon by two skiffs 160 nautical miles off the coast of Somalia on February 22, 2018.³⁴ The private security contractors (PSCs) returned fire and the ship safely escaped the attack. The presence of private security contractors (PSCs) will continue to be a desirable option for shipping vessels who transit through High Risk Areas (HRA).³⁵

Choke Points in the Horn of Africa

There are seven significant choke points across the globe that see an immense amount of cargo traffic and play a vital role in the global shipping industry.³⁶ These choke points, also known as constrictions, provide an opportunistic environment for piracy as the ships are more vulnerable as they navigate closer to land and are more-less "trapped" until fully through the choke point. The Strait of Bab el-Mandeb allows the passage of vessels along northeastern Africa. For vessels wanting to cross into the Suez Canal, this strait is a necessary route and thus forms a major choke point. The Bab al-Mandeb choke point has

created a significant hazard for shipping vessels, especially with the escalating conflict in Yemen. On July 25, 2018, Houthi rebels used this choke point to their advantage when they attacked a Saudi oil tanker in the Red Sea and caused slight damage.³⁷

The European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) established the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC) in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean on December 8, 2008 as part of Operation Atalanta.³⁸ This 490 nautical miles long transit corridor provides shipping vessels with EU escort. The truce between participating nations is gradually being eroded and the situation has escalated with a resurgence of piracy over the last two years. The naval support will be withdrawn at the end 2018 and this could propel the resurgence to strengthen.³⁹ While the EU has safeguarded this region for nearly 10 years, there's a new major force contributing to anti-piracy operations in the Horn of Africa as China has established its first overseas military base in Djibouti.⁴⁰ Furthermore, China has overtaken the U.S. as Djibouti's top source of foreign investment as Beijing grasped the regions geopolitics while others are exploiting its vulnerabilities in what has become a high-stakes chess game.⁴¹

Al-Shabaab and the Resurgence of Piracy in the Horn of Africa

The US-backed Somali National Armed Forces (SNAF) have been suppressing al-Shabaab strongholds and this has forced the terrorist group to deploy significant resources to the territories that are at risk of being lost. Some pirates from the struggling local coastal communities have agreed to assist al-Shabaab by returning to piracy in a business partnership where they'll smuggle weapons, fighters, and cash across the Gulf of Aden from Yemen. By doing so, the pirates would be well-compensated, and al-Shabaab would be able to provide replenishments to the front lines of where they're fighting to hold territory. The Somali pirates have also received increased funding from terrorist organizations such as al-Shabaab for every successful hijacking.⁴² The Yemeni-based al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has played a role in the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa as they've infused significant amounts of cash into criminal networks and resources needed to conduct attacks.⁴³ Piracy incidents have also been recorded off the coast of Yemen, a country engulfed by a civil war and terrorist groups.⁴⁴

The recent developments concerning a mutually beneficial partnership between pirate and terrorist groups has alarmed the international community. Currently, the pirate groups and al-Shabaab are more-less using each other as they both seek additional resources to either hijack ships or hold territory.⁴⁵ The capturing of the weapons-laden Al Faruq off the coast of Basaso in September 2017 provided additional evidence of collusion between pirates and al-Shabaab.⁴⁶ Local maritime security personnel speculated that this boat was the work of the Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and destined for al-Shabaab in Somalia. Another hijacking that supports collusion between pirates and al-Shabaab was the seizure of the Emirati ship Aris 13 off the coast of Somalia in March 2017. According to officials, this hijacking was executed in an area plagued by al-Shabaab, disenfranchised local fishermen, and weapons smuggling.⁴⁷ The dialogue among local elders claimed that the hijacking was done by local fishermen and former pirates who are frustrated with the illegal fishing by foreign trawlers. They also suggested that if the illegal fishing doesn't end that local fishermen will seek alternative ways to make a livelihood, whether through piracy and or joining al-Shabaab.

Riskier Navigation and the Resurgence of Piracy in the Horn of Africa

As piracy came to a halt in 2012, shipping companies started to engage in riskier navigation in the Horn of Africa. The shipping vessels became less vigilant and more adventurous with their navigation routes as the threat of piracy decreased. The risks that they took provided a permissive environment for piracy networks to coordinate attacks on these often-vulnerable vessels. There were four reported hijackings and one boarding within a 30-day period between March and April 2017 within the High-Risk Areas (HRA) off Somalia that started with the Aris-13 tanker being taken on March 13, 2017.⁴⁸ This was also the first hijacking of a shipping vessel in five years, which signified that Somali piracy groups were still capable of launching sophisticated attacks in the Horn of Africa. Aris-13's fate is an example of the consequences of poor vigilance and cutting corners through a restricted area.⁴⁹ Oceans Beyond Piracy (OBP) observed a 100% increase in total incidents between 2016 and 2017. OBP also confirmed that the riskier navigation by shipping vessels was a factor in the increased attacks in 2017.

The shipping companies not only embarked in riskier navigation, but they also cut back on their usage of private security contractors (PSCs). There has been a sharp decline in the usage of PSCs over the last three years. The average monthly usage rate for private security contractors was 25.1 percent in 2017, marking a 13 percent decrease from the 38 percent at the start of 2015.⁵⁰ The aforementioned drop in the usage of PSCs strengthens the argument that shipping companies engaged in riskier navigation as they contracted less private security than they have in previous years. This would imply that they were becoming more confident that they could take cost-reducing measures such as traveling near hostel areas and or at slower speeds to save on fuel costs.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that al-Shabaab has exacerbated the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa as they've established business partnerships with local piracy groups who are capitalizing off of the escalating crisis in Yemen. The crisis in Yemen has caused trafficking to surge over the last two years. Al-Shabaab has become a constant threat to the Puntland State of Somalia as they continue to smuggle weapons, fighters, and cash through Bosaso, a port in Somaliland on the Gulf of Aden, with assistance from local pirate groups.⁵¹ The geographic proximity of Bosaso and the Gulf of Aden makes it easier to plan and conduct illicit trafficking of all kinds that is being met with minimal resistance.

Furthermore, al-Shabaab have found sanctuary in Puntland and have been attempting to tap into discontent throughout the region resulting from anger over illegal fishing along with corruption and clan rivalries. Al-Shabaab's presence is strengthening despite pressure from the international military coalition in southern Somalia. It's becoming evident that Yemeni supporters have infused significant amounts of cash into larger criminal networks that include pirate crews, negotiators, informants and access to equipment and resources.

Moreover, al-Shabaab has been funded by al-Qaeda, who have seen a growing revenue stream and influence throughout the region.⁵² Hamza bin Laden, the son of Osama bin Laden, has sought to unify Jihadists groups and strengthen their numbers to avenge his father's death and to fight other groups such as ISIS. Hamza has had a role in assisting al-Shabaab, an al-Qaeda affiliate, to hold territory in the Horn of Africa as there has been an increasing resistance mounted by the U.S.-backed Somali military. Consequently, al-Shabaab are now on the defensive and being forced to explore any and all options to continue their fight in an effort to hold territory which is becoming increasingly vulnerable to resistance.

The resurgence of pirate attacks and increasing instability in Yemen have paved the way for the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) to establish a new security corridor for the Gulf of Aden and the Bab Al Mandeb strait.⁵³ The proposed corridor will provide guidance and armed security to assist with riskier navigation routes. The United Nations is creating employment opportunities in Bosaso by constructing fish-processing centers.⁵⁴ The objective of this project that is being spearheaded by the United Nations is to provide stability in the region by offering jobs to those who are disenfranchised. This can ultimately deter Somalis interested in piracy as a livelihood and also reduce the number of perspective pirates who'd be willing to assist al-Shabaab.

Furthermore, the United Nations is also training coast guards from across Somalia in Bosaso to combat the resurgence of piracy. In addition to the United Nations-trained coast guards, the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF), which is the most powerful marine outfit in the region and funded by the United Arab Emirates, are also increasing their presence by often sailing towards Yemen and conducting searches on suspected skiffs.⁵⁵

Conclusively, al-Shabaab has been the primary factor behind the resurgence of piracy in the Horn of Africa and will continue to play a significant role until the crisis in Yemen deescalates along with regional discontent throughout Puntland.

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