

### **A Wicked Brew: Piracy and Islamism in the Horn of Africa**

**Tim Sullivan**

The recent surge in pirate attacks off the coast of Somalia has again revealed the vulnerability of U.S. and allied interests to transnational, unconventional security threats—and demonstrated just how confounded we remain in determining the appropriate responses to these challenges. Somali piracy has now become more than simply a nuisance: the explosion in attacks has the potential to disrupt international trade (at least one major international shipping firm has announced plans to shift its transit routes), and further destabilize the volatile Horn of Africa region. The audacity of recent hijackings, combined with an uncoordinated and anemic international response, portends a growing threat. In reaction to the news that the pirates had seized the *Sirius Star*, a Saudi supertanker, 450 miles southeast of Mombasa, Kenya, Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, echoed the sentiments of many analysts and observers when he said that he was “stunned” by the Somali pirates’ range of operations.

A more disturbing element of the Somali piracy phenomenon is the apparent connection between the pirates and the country’s militant Islamist movement. Though it hasn’t been making the front pages, Somalia is in the throes of a protracted insurgency. The country’s primary Islamist militant group, al-Shabaab, was recently added to the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations affiliated with Al-Qaeda. The group has emerged as the successor (and was the former militia) of Somalia’s Islamic Courts Union (ICU), which in the summer of 2006 came close to unseating the country’s Transitional Federal Government (TFG); the ICU was eventually defeated by the TFG with the help of the Ethiopian military.

Al-Shabaab spent the past two years consolidating its influence in the southern portion of the country, attracting both indigenous recruits and foreign fighters, and receiving training from a number of veteran Arab jihadis. The reported return from Eritrea of exiled ICU leader and alleged Al Qaeda associate Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, along with reports that the insurgents have established a presence in towns within ten miles of Mogadishu, are indications that Al-Shabaab is positioning itself to deal a fatal blow to the TFG.

Reports indicate that elements of the Al-Shabaab militia—which, among Somalia’s many armed groups, has achieved a position of dominance—have in the past received a portion of the pirates’ booty in return for allowing the brigands to pursue their illicit trade undisturbed. As analysts have noted, it is not uncommon for terrorist groups to ally with more conventional criminal networks as a means of funding their ideological enterprises. One can only imagine the causes Al-Shabaab’s leaders—some of whom, according to the State Department, have trained and fought in Afghanistan—have been dedicating these funds to, beyond their immediate effort to overthrow the internationally-backed TFG. In one recent instance, following the pirates’ capture

of a Ukrainian transport ship carrying Russian-made tanks, rocket-propelled grenades, and anti-aircraft guns en route to Mombasa, the Islamists immediately demanded access to the weapons on board. By that point, the pirates had already attracted international scrutiny from their recent spate of high-profile attacks, and foreign forces were already on the scene; under other circumstances, a portion of the ship's goods might have ended up in the hands of Al-Shabaab militants.

While the recent seizure of the *Sirius Star*, which contains roughly \$100 million worth of oil, has reportedly pitted elements of Al-Shabaab against the pirates, the rift between the groups seems only to be a function of the booty at stake. Last week, an Al-Shabaab spokesman condemned the pirates' hijacking of the Muslim-owned vessel as a violation of Islamic law, insisting that the militants would liberate the ship by force, if necessary. Reports indicate that insurgents are massing in the coastal city of Harardheere, a hub of piracy, and that a clash between the pirates and the Islamists is imminent. But residents of the region are skeptical about the militants' true motivations. According to one clan elder quoted in the *London Telegraph*, "There are many militiamen who have arrived in the town and they want to get a share from the pirates if the ransom is paid." Residents' skepticism about the militants' sudden sense of altruism is justified, given the group's past arrangements with the pirates, the massive ransom the ship's owners stand to offer, and the fact that while other Iranian-operated ships have been seized in the past weeks, this is the first time the pirates have taken a stand on the issue.

The extent of the current cooperation and the potential for future partnerships between the Islamists and the pirates remains unclear. At best, the two groups will remain partners of convenience. The flow of funds alone between the two groups is alarming, given the escalation of insurgent activity throughout the country in the past weeks. But a recent story in *Jane's Terrorism and Security Monitor* provides an even more disturbing picture. In it, the former coordinator of the United Nations' Somalia Monitoring Group describes an extensive enterprise between the pirates and Islamists, involving weapons smuggling and joint training efforts. In short, the two threats—Somali piracy and Somali Islamism—are converging; any attempt to tackle one will require an effort to address the other.

On its face, the threat of high-seas piracy—while unsettling—seems vaguely anachronistic. Piracy linked to transnational Islamist terrorism, however, is a decidedly 21<sup>st</sup>-century challenge, and one which the United States and its allies must approach with an appropriate degree of seriousness. Somalia has always been a tough nut to crack; it appears to have just gotten harder.

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