Piracy and Terrorism: How to Contain the Threat of Al-Shabaab and Maritime Piracy in Somalia

By Thomas Couchenour

The United States must help effective African militaries contain the al-Shabaab terrorist group and refrain from instigating piratical strikes rather than resorting to “imperialist intervention” in Somalia. Somalia is located in Eastern Africa, bordering Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Kenya, and the Indian Ocean. Somalia achieved political relevance through terror organizations born under its people’s struggle for legitimate governance. Somali maritime piracy presents a threat to an array of nations’ economic interests in the Gulf of Aden. Due to NATO and unilateral efforts from Russia, China, and India, Somali piracy damage has decreased substantially since 2011. The Somali terrorist organization, “al-Shabaab” is an Islamic extremist group allied with al-Qaeda and engages in similar attacks with assault weapons, dismemberings, and suicide bombings. Shabaab attacks haven’t exceeded the borders of Somalia, Kenya, and Uganda; though threats have recently been made against Washington and New York. The U.N. expects terrorist activity from al-Shabaab to increase following the US airstrike death of group
leader, Ahmed Godane. Al-Shabaab currently presents a larger threat than maritime piracy despite issues with the Somali TFG and Kenyan and Ethiopian military forces. The U.S. government must acknowledge the relevance of AMISOM and unilateral African military efforts to combat al-Shabaab.

The Somali people’s struggle for governance allowed the formation of violent groups which have overtaken large portions of the nation to establish a base. The Somali struggle for stable governance fractured the nation, leading to “instability[…] which led to the escalation of piracy and transformation of a geographically strategic sea route into a High Risk Area.” In 1961, the people of Somalia adopted their first national constitution, attempting to erect a democratic government, though “political parties were a fluid concept, with one-person parties forming before an election, only to defect to the winning party following the election.”

Somalia’s series of government entities, born since 1961, maintain the goal of uniting Somalis throughout Africa and the world to create a Greater Somalia; “[an] issue [which] has been a major cause of past crises between Somalia and its neighbors—Ethiopia, Kenya, and Djibouti.”

Somali governments experienced exceptional difficulties achieving legitimacy “since the collapse of the Siad Barre government in 1991[.] Sea piracy in the Gulf of Aden is related to this
breakdown as also to the destruction by international fisheries of the Somalian coastal community’s main source of livelihoods.”

Somalis’ perception of lawlessness allowed the al-Shabaab terrorist organization to “gain support by promising people security, but its credibility was knocked when it rejected Western food aid to combat a 2011 drought and famine.” The Somali citizenry’s desire to form Greater Somalia ironically helps combat the violent organizations they allowed to form due to the counter-terrorist forces it attracts from neighboring nations.

The U.S. government perceives the Shabaab terrorist organization as the biggest threat within Somalia due to their expansionary tendencies, outward threats, and violence toward political figures within the country. “’Al-Shabab,’ or ‘The Youth,’ is an Al-Qaeda-linked militant group and U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization fighting for the creation of a fundamentalist Islamic state in Somalia.”

Al-Shabaab threatens peace and democratic progression in the horn of Africa through “bombings—including various types of suicide attacks—typically targeting Somali government officials, AMISOM, and perceived allies of the SFG,” in order to destabilize non-radical political progression. Al-Shabaab members recruited a handful of men and women from “Canada, Europe, Australia, Saudi Arabia, Minneapolis-St.
Paul, and elsewhere in the United States[,]” in an attempt to procure global relevance. The U.S. media inadvertently helped al-Shabaab gain publicity by labeling “15 Somali men and 3 women” as “an exodus of Minnesotans to the Middle East,” likely in an effort to bolster ratings.

Through “the ongoing conflict between…Al-Shabaab and Hizbul Islam[…] and the weak TFG and its military allies[,]” the Shabaab presents a valid threat to people in the Horn of Africa.

Presently, the United States should not validate threats from “a senior Shabab official[…] that the Shabab would attack Americans in New York and Washington,” because of their present lack of means to stage an attack from overseas. Al-Shabaab seeks to become a recognized global force in order to spread their radical Islamic ideals, though attacks have yet to exceed the boundaries of the countries directly neighboring Somalia.

Al-Shabaab’s members employ mass violence, often suicidal, in order to ensure that Eastern Africans strictly adhere to Islam. Al-Shabaab validated themselves as a serious threat to people in the Horn of Africa through “the brazen attack[…] on the upmarket Westgate Mall[.]

The fact that] four heavily armed gunmen could hold off Kenya’s police and military forces did little to inspire confidence…the terrorists killed 67 people.” Shabaab members primarily target government entities to spread fears that no one is safe, such as in the “suicide bombing by Al
Haraka al Shabaab al Mujahideen on 4 October [which] killed over 70 people[...] in the Transition Federal Government compound[,] mainly teenagers who were there with their families to take an examination for scholarships.”xxxvi Because of a lack of means to attack the U.S. directly, al-Shabaab members martyred AMISOM forces as “a suicide bomber detonated his explosives-laden car next to a convoy” during “a [higher] probability of attacks following the killing of al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Abdi Godane by a U.S. airstrike[.]”xxxvii The Shabaab successfully employs terror tactics to instill their religious mindset on Somalis like Abdi Jimali, who recounts “Pools of blood and twisted bodies were littered along Maka Mukarama Road after a loud explosion[.]”xxxviii Shabaab attacks have caused public frustration at Somalia’s TFG by Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta, who “bluntly told a gathering of Kenyan Muslims and Christians: ‘If [the TFG’s] desire is for Kenya to pull out of Somalia…all they need to do is what they should [have] done 20 years ago, put their house in order.’”xxxix Al-Shabaab members employ gruesome tactics to gain international notoriety in compensation for their seemingly limited source of members and transportation capabilities.

Al-Shabaab attempts to enforce their radical Islamic views in East African countries by publicly committing violent acts against women, children, and moderate Muslims. The nature of
Shabaab attacks besmirches Westerners by inspiring their scholars to publish offensive content saying things like, “Islamism is a political ideology…Its main role is not to offer spiritual solace.”\textsuperscript{xx} Al-Shabaab’s members spare no one with inadequate knowledge of Islam. A Somali man recounts “haunting tales of kids being shot at point-blank range and others being…asked questions about the Qu’ran. Those who failed to answer correctly were executed.”\textsuperscript{xxi} Shabaab attacks on their own wives are brutal enough to change U.S. policy, namely the case of an El Paso woman who successfully fled Somalia and whose case caused “the federal government [to] recognize that female genital mutilation was a form of official persecution[.]”\textsuperscript{xxii} “Salim Bakari Mwarangi…a moderate Muslim cleric[…] was shot after evening prayers” by Shabaab members who sought to prove that the peaceful practice of Islam would not suffice to spread the Islamic state throughout Africa.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Al-Shabaab’s inhumane tactics damaged their own cause when they “destroyed the tombs of Sufi saints in the Kismayo area…mobilizing several groups which began fighting in Galgadud.”\textsuperscript{xxiv} Al-Shabaab terrorists generally target non-Muslims and moderate Muslims in Eastern African countries to push their radical ideals, presenting no direct threat to the U.S.
Al-Shabaab loses territory and influence in Somalia because of Kenyan, Ethiopian, and internal moderate Muslim intervention. Due to popular Somali outrage over terror attacks, “members of the Shabaab…have been arrested across Somalia, and smaller towns have been retaken, but rebels still hold large parts of the country.”xxv Al-Shabaab’s image deteriorated as a new, non-Shabaab influenced, regime took hold in Mogadishu, resulting in the “departure of Ethiopian troops[,] a strategic loss for the group.”xxvi In response to attacks, AMISOM members successfully repelled al-Shabaab members from “one of the last strategically important cities the group controlled in Somalia, Barawe[.]”xxvii Western and even Kenyan media ignores vast rural areas under Shabaab control in celebration of key victories, publishing that “pressure from AMISOM and Ethiopian forces has largely degraded al-Shabaab’s control.”xxviii The counterproductive brutality of Shabaab attacks not only repulses civilians but creates cases like that of “Ahmed[,] who] deserted the Shabaab because he wanted a ‘real family, not just a bunch of heavily armed, sociopathic militants who called themselves a family,’ he said.”xxix Western powers perceive al-Shabaab as a decreasing threat due to Eastern African victories which decrease their presence Somalia.
Somali Pirates assert the legitimacy of their cause through their poverty and alleged environmental exploitation at the hands of the U.S. and Europe. “‘We don’t consider ourselves sea bandits,’ [Somali pirate spokesman Sugule Ali] said. ‘We consider sea bandits those who illegally fish in our seas and dump waste in our seas and carry weapons in our seas. We are simply patrolling our seas.’”

In order to create specific targets to combat, the United States Navy classifies maritime piracy as follows: (a) an illegal act of violence or detention or an act of depredation; (b) committed for private ends; (c) by the crew or passengers of a private ship or aircraft; (d) on the high seas or in an exclusive economic zone; (e) against another ship or aircraft.[.] The economic justification of Somali piratical attacks appears legitimate due to the fact that “one estimate suggests income from this [piratical] activity is higher than the gross GDP of…Puntland in north-eastern Somalia, where piracy is most rampant.” In an effort to deter as many nations as possible from combatting them, Somali pirates assert that, “Behind every navy ship that is supposedly guarding against the pirates, they are bringing with them many foreign fishing vessels.” Western media outlets unintentionally help legitimize the pirates’ cause by pointing out after a hostage execution that, “four dead was unprecedented. Just a few weeks ago they let go some Sri Lanka fishermen after they essentially said, ‘You’re poor like us.’”

The
remaining Somali pirates rely on international sympathy to their economic cause for survival, largely because they are untrained ex fishermen; not a military force.

Somali piracy has gradually decreased since 2008 as pirates cash in or international organizations turn them in for prosecution by the Somali TFG. Likely due to the more straightforward nature of combatting them, the U.S. Navy remains disproportionately more focused on Somali pirates than terrorist groups, observing, “We have seen a sharp reduction of piracy incidents off the coast of Somalia and in the Indian Ocean, but currently 12 ships and 159 people are being held in the hands of Somali pirates.”

Piracy off the coast of Somalia decreases regardless of international intervention due to the economic nature of their attacks, such as in the case of “notorious sea raider…Big Mouth[, who] announced this week that he was quitting after an eight-year career[.] Big Mouth – Mohamed Abdi Hassan – was named in a U.N. report last year as one of the most notorious and influential leaders of a Somali pirate network.”

Piracy as a means of last resort is spreading across the continent of Africa due to the unnecessary media attention it inspired, as “piracy off the coast of West Africa has now overtaken Somali piracy…966 sailors were attacked in West Africa in 2012 compared with 851 off the coast of Somalia.”

Somali pirate attacks are rarely as fatal as West African piratical
strikes; for example, “Somali pirates have freed seven Indian sailors detained for four years in exchange for an undisclosed ransom.” xxxviii Regardless of reason, Somali piracy is indisputably decreasing, as reports reveal that “in 2012, the cost of Somali piracy was estimated to be down 12.5 percent from 2011 figures…[These] indications suggest that 2013’s figures…will be significantly lower again.” xxxix Somali piracy appears to be decreasing annually as international efforts to combat such acts increase while the motivation to resort to piratical measures gradually wears off.

The Shabaab terrorist organization’s direct animosity toward the U.S. presents a more relevant threat than maritime pirates’ defense of Somali waters. Violent organizations in Somalia form from the Somali people’s expansionary desires under a series of weak governments. Al-Shabaab’s terror attacks, open alliance with al Qaeda, and continual recruitment ensure its seat as the most relevant Somali threat. Al-Shabaab’s members succeed at attracting international attention through violent attacks on women, young people, politicians, and religious figures throughout Africa. Shabaab terrorists successfully portray their radical Islamic ideals to the international community yet, in doing so, make enemies of moderate Muslims throughout Africa. Al-Shabaab membership and territory simultaneously shrink thanks to efforts from the
AMISOM and the Ethiopian and Kenyan armies, though they still retain much of rural Somalia.

Somali pirates appear to legitimately engage in violence, currently with less than 1000 annual casualties, out of economic necessity. Actual casualty counts from the International Maritime Organization decline much less rapidly than what the Western media advertises. Al-Shabaab presents, if there is a threat to the U.S., a much larger threat than piracy thanks to their still vast territory, active recruitment, and link to al-Qaeda.

The United States government needs to fund AMISOM and the Kenyan and Ethiopian governments to better contain al-Shabaab while abstaining from business in the Somali portion of the Sea of Aden. “Although it has lost control of most towns and cities, [al-Shabaab] still dominates most rural areas [of Somalia]” because they attract less government attention and are more geographically advantageous. The U.S. government must help African groups combat al-Shabaab because, as the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center reports, “As of 2013…pressure from AMISOM and Ethiopian forces has largely degraded al-Shabaab’s control.” The U.S. government should refrain from staging sporadic attacks such as the airstrike on Ahmed Godane to avoid the unjust violence they inspire within Somalia and Kenya. After a brief decline in al-Shabaab attacks, “[V]iolence in Mogadishu resumed…after what was perceived as imperialist
intervention from the United States.”xliii Somali piracy only affects foreign vessels in the Somali portion of the Sea of Aden, in which impoverished pirates “just [see] a big ship…so we [stop] it.”xiv The U.S. government merely needs to stay out of Somali waters and refocus its efforts from over publicized strikes to supporting local successful militias to suppress violence from violent Somali organizations.

The U.S. government primarily needs to sponsor the effective AMISOM: African Union Mission in Somalia, and the Kenyan and Ethiopian militaries in order to reduce the threat of al-Shabaab. The U.S. should financially aid AMISOM because its very purpose is, “to reduce the threat posed by al-Shabaab and other armed opposition groups [within Somalia].”xlv In an Ethiopian strike as an extension of AMISOM, “130 al-Shabab fighters were killed, with minimal [losses][sp] on the government and Ethiopian side[.]”xlv The U.S. government should also consider funding Kenya’s effective army, which “struck camps used by the al-Shabaab, killing more than 100 fighters, after the militants claimed responsibility for a bus attack in the northeast of the country that killed 28 non-Muslims[.]”xlvii AMISOM also issued police training to over 500 Somali men for the purpose of “enhancing safety in the capital Mogadishu and other parts of Somalia.”xlviii AMISOM Special Representative Maman S. Sikikou states, “Somali forces, with
only logistical and surveillance support from AMISOM and our UN Partners, liberated the southern port of Koday, one of [the] last few natural seaports that was still controlled by al-Shabaab. U.S. funding for select African militaries would present a detriment to al-Shabaab because African armies have been the most efficient and determined enemies of the group.

The U.S. government must maintain positive relations with the moderate Islamic governments in the Horn of Africa in order to become a more difficult target for al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab tried to disunite Kenyans “By fomenting discontent between two of [Kenya’s] major ethnic groups, both predominantly Christian,” due to the immediate threat they pose to the group. The U.S. must maintain positive relations with all countries in the Horn of Africa because AMISOM contains “Uganda, Burundi, Djibouti, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Ethiopia who are deployed in six sectors covering south and central Somalia.” National empathy could be achieved easily over familiar issues like the death of a cleric who “was unpopular with radical Muslim youths in [Likoni] because he campaigned against radicalization and drug use.” The U.S. needs to engage in diplomatic measures to avoid conflict over deaths when the Shabaab “wanted to prove they could strike back [against Kenya and Uganda for U.S. drone strikes] spectacularly, regardless of the cost to civilians.” Aid must be issued immediately, due to
Somali media attitude that “[Shabaab] notoriety has more to do with Western concerns over terrorism, piracy and security than the protection of civilians.”\textsuperscript{liv} The U.S. government must achieve sustainable diplomatic relations with governments in the Horn of Africa who successfully combat terrorist threats within to retain peace after killing civilians and inciting multiple Shabaab attacks from U.S. airstrikes.

U.S. personnel must cease their presence in Somalia and Somali waters in order to avoid motivating al-Shabaab members and becoming targets for pirates. U.S. soldiers must decrease their presence in Somalia because “Al-Shabaab warns that [the bombing attempt in Uganda] is the first of many retaliatory bombings for the U.S. airstrike killing leader Ahmed Godane.”\textsuperscript{lv} Shabaab strategies have proven effective against the U.S. after “special operations force cut short its mission to capture a Kenyan of Somali origin linked to the terror organization al-Shabaab…in part because a group of children unexpectedly showed up[.]
\textsuperscript{lvii} The U.S. military must cease direct intervention with the Shabaab to avoid emphasizing the fact that “since 2007 [U.S. airstrikes in Somalia] have killed up to 169 people…[of] those killed, between 11 and 59 people are reported to be civilians.”\textsuperscript{lvii} U.S. military intervention has proven ineffective in dissuading Somali pirates who publicly respond to Western intervention saying, “You only die
American presence in Somalia must cease since it inspires terror attacks and offers pirates profitable hostages.

The U.S. government must financially intervene against al-Shabaab’s attacks throughout Africa from and within Somalia because it has inspired multiple of them, attracted Shabaab threats, and endangered interests within the region. The radical Islamist group al-Shabaab is losing much of its base in Somalia thanks to unified African suppression yet still claims much of rural Somalia and cites U.S. airstrikes as grounds for attacks. Al-Shabaab presently lacks the means to carry out an attack on U.S. soil, is a satellite of al-Qaeda and threatens U.S. relations with Africa. Maritime piratical activity in the Sea of Aden around Somalia still threatens nearly 1000 victims annually, though it only targets vessels in Somali territory. Attacks from the U.S. government have been less effective than AMISOM and unilateral Kenyan and Ethiopian battles and killed civilians in Somalia due to the imprecise nature of drone strikes. The U.S. government will benefit from financially aiding the primary combatants against al-Shabaab by efficiently reducing Shabaab influence and maintaining positive relations with the nations threatened by al-Shabaab retaliation to U.S. strikes and propaganda.


vi Ibid., 1.


“Al-Shabaab sets the agenda,” Africa Confidential 52, no. 20: 10, Military & Government Collection, EBSCOhost, accessed December 8, 2014.


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http://www.imo.org/MediaCentre/Secretary-GeneralsSpeechesToMeetings/Pages/FP-56-opening.aspx.


xxxix Farrant, “Pirate Experience,” 77.

x “Who Are,”

xi U.S. Department of State, “Al-Shabaab.”


xiv Gettleman, “Pirates Tell Their Side.”


“Kenyan Muslim Cleric.”

“Shabaab Sets Agenda,” 10.


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