

The Somali Federal Government and Counter-Piracy: New Government, New Possibilities

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Somali Federal Government (SFG) officials condemn piracy but little, if any, substantive action on the ground has followed. The gap between rhetoric and results is certainly understandable, as the SFG lacks de facto control of the central and northern regions from which the vast majority of pirates have operated.

Previous Somali administrations have made attempts to take ownership of the counter-piracy process. When vessel hijackings escalated in late 2008, for instance, it soon brought pleas from the then-Transitional Federal Government (TFG) for financing to rebuild the defunct Somali navy, all in the name of fighting the coastal brigands. But to build a navy out of nothing—one capable of effectively fighting pirates along the length of the country's 3,200-kilometer coastline (and thousands of kilometers into the Indian Ocean)—was clearly overly ambitious.

In early 2012, the Nairobi-based private security contractor Halliday Finch announced a proposal to construct a 2,500-strong coastal defense force under the ambit of the TFG, eventually capable of carrying out deep-water operations. The mammoth project was envisioned to cost \$900 million over ten years, with Halliday Finch claiming that the first \$52 million installment had already been pledged.¹ Though former Somali defense minister Hussein Arab Isse confirmed in late February 2012 that an agreement with Halliday Finch had been reached, the project did not materialize.²

Earlier this year, however, Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud announced a more realistic policy: an amnesty program for pirates agreeing to give up the trade. "Somalia has been plagued by piracy for many years now and these criminals have badly affected global shipping. Piracy has to end," said President Mohamud in a press statement on February 28, 2013.

Clan elders were mediating ongoing talks with pirates, the president said, in the hope of reaching a deal to rehabilitate the young men involved, while at the same time holding the top leaders accountable. The amnesty was brokered by Mohamed Tiiceey, president of the central Somali mini-state of Himan and Heeb, where many pirates hail from. Tiiceey claims—he’s kept careful count—that his administration has won over 949 active young pirates with promises of amnesty.³ Yet Tiiceey’s biggest coup was to claim credit for the so-called “retirement” of Mohamed Abdi Hassan Afweyne (“Big Mouth”), one of piracy’s founding fathers (and one of three pirate bosses placed on a sanctions list by the U.S. Treasury). In January 2013, Afweyne held a much-publicized press conference during which he declared his intention to give up piracy for good.

In a move last year that courted international scandal, Afweyne was awarded a diplomatic passport and appointed as a “counter-piracy officer” by former Somali president Sheikh Sharif Ahmed—even before he had officially renounced the business. To hear President Mahmoud speak about his administration’s latest measure, however, raises the hope that the days of such venality are past. “We must emphasize that this is just a partial amnesty and does not apply to the pirate kingpins, who take most of the money,” said President Mahmoud. If Sheikh Mohamud’s administration is committed to a clean break from the past, the first step is for the SFG to enact long-awaited anti-piracy legislation, as envisioned in the 2011 Mogadishu Roadmap.⁴

The frontline of the fight against piracy remains in the places where the pirates actually are: the autonomous regions of Himan and Heeb, Galmudug, Puntland, and, to a lesser extent, Somaliland. While the deployment of armed guards on board commercial vessels has led to a remarkable decline in piracy over the last year, the *détente* they have ushered in is fragile. Hiring armed guards is extremely expensive; at a conservative estimate, a three-man team costs upwards of \$10,000 per day. If piracy remains at its current ebb, shipping companies—who operate in one of the most financially cutthroat industries in the world—could well stop deploying them; the international naval armadas deployed off the coast of Somalia will eventually sail home. At which point, pirate activity may very well flare up once more.

The solution to piracy lies in robust law enforcement at the local level. Somaliland’s security forces have been so effective at clamping down on would-be pirates that only a handful of

attacks have originated from the region. Local officials, moreover, have worked with the U.N. Development Project (UNDP) and the Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to rehabilitate a prison in the capital of Hargeisa, part of a broader \$24 million program to strengthen the judicial capacities of Somaliland and Puntland.

In Puntland, the local administration created its own counter-piracy task force in early 2010: the Puntland Marine Police Force (PMPF), a 1,000-strong contingent trained by foreign contractors. The PMPF has had some notable successes, including a December 2012 rescue operation that freed the long-abandoned crew of the *MV Iceberg*.

The international counter-piracy strategy in Somalia should focus on supporting similar local initiatives. And it is here we see a potential role for the SFG. As the internationally recognized government of Somalia, Sheikh Mohamud's administration is in an ideal position to bridge the gap between international donors and the country's regional governments; the impetus and framework for such cooperation has already been established through the 2011 Mogadishu Roadmap.

Assisting local governments in attracting international funds for tactical training, intelligence gathering, logistics, road construction, vehicles, marine patrol aircraft, and judicial capacity building would be a far more cost-effective strategy of countering piracy than the billions spent on warship patrols, private security, and insurance premiums. Such an arrangement has additional benefits for the Somali nation-building process; by proving its ability to facilitate regional development, cooperation with the SFG would become increasingly attractive to Somalia's autonomous governments. Successful federal-regional coordination in counter-piracy efforts could therefore help crystalize a working model for Somali federalism, a hot-button issue whose precise form was left largely undefined in Somalia's 2012 constitution.

For years, analysts have lectured that piracy must be solved on the ground, not at sea. If so, the first step is to recognize the reality on the ground in Somalia: a reality that consists of local, clan-based governments in control of the vast majority of the country's territory. It is within this

political environment that the SFG, if it wishes to spearhead a national counter-piracy strategy, must orient itself.

Endnotes

¹ Halliday Finch cited Qatar, Mauritius, Nigeria, and Angola as interested national donors. Halliday Finch's plan was for the force to partially fund itself through the sale of fishing licenses. In this respect its proposed business model was similar to the Somali-Canadian coastguard (SomCan), a private security company that operated in Puntland from 2002-2005, and again in 2008-2009. SomCan issued fishing licenses to its own foreign clients, in particular the Thai company Sirichai, and stationed armed guards on the decks of their vessels—in the process angering local Somali fishermen and arguably contributing to the rise of piracy.

² In July 2013, the SFG entered into a similar agreement with the Atlantic Marine and Offshore Group, a mysterious Dutch company, to provide coast guard services. Notably, counter-piracy was not listed as an objective in the creation of the partnership.

³ The decision by these individuals to accept a largely symbolic amnesty probably stemmed more from the proliferation of armed guard detachments on board commercial vessels than any moral awakening. Armed guards, now present on an estimated 30 to 40 per cent of vessels transiting through “pirate waters,” have been widely credited with the sharp decline in hijackings over the past year.

⁴ The Mogadishu Roadmap, the product of a three-day consultative meeting in September 2011 between the TFG and regional authorities, aims at developing a comprehensive maritime security strategy encompassing legislation, resource management, the definition of Somalia's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), anti-piracy community engagement, and coastal economic projects. “Report of the Secretary-General pursuant to Security Council resolution 1950 (2010), S/2011/433.” United Nations Security Council. <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/544/11/PDF/N1154411.pdf?OpenElement>, 3.

This article was commissioned by the Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (INEGMA) on behalf of the third United Arab Emirates Counter Piracy Conference, ‘**Countering Maritime Piracy: Continued Efforts for Regional Capacity Building**’, organized by the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs in partnership with global ports operator DP World and Abu Dhabi Ports Company, held in Dubai on September 11-12, 2013. The opinions expressed in this paper are the views of the author only, and do not reflect the opinions or positions of the conference organizers. Content may have been edited for formatting purposes.