

THE RETURN OF SOMALI PIRACY MYTH OR REALITY?

A perfect storm of deteriorating onshore conditions and increased opportunities offshore has compelled pirate gangs to again push out to sea in 2017 to try their luck. Between January and May Control Risks recorded at least 17 reported incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Horn of Africa region, including five successful hijacks and crew kidnaps. Additional incidents are likely to occur in the coming weeks and months, but Control Risks anticipates a decrease in numbers over the summer. Incident levels are unlikely to return to those seen between 2009 and 2012 when Somali piracy was at its height.

WHY NOW?

The increase in incidents in 2017 has demonstrated the renewed intent of Somali pirate groups to target ships operating in the region. The conditions prompting pirates to head back out to sea and attempt further hijacks this year can be roughly divided into longstanding onshore “push” factors, and more recent offshore “pull” factors:

“PUSH” FACTORS

- Persistent, dire economic stagnation; drought and a major famine
- Local security forces busy with al-Shabab and an Islamic State affiliate present in Puntland; permissive onshore security environment
- Continued weak judiciary and governance issues in coastal areas and tolerant coastal communities

- Real and perceived operator complacency encouraged by the previous decline in piracy events
- Phased naval drawdown resulting in fewer patrols and surveillance coverage of the Gulf of Aden and western Indian Ocean
- NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield stood down in November 2016
- Emboldened illegal fishing fleets drawn closer to the Somali coast after years of low pirate activity, re-kindling the pirates’ core grievance

“PULL” FACTORS

WHO, WHAT, WHEN?

According to the statement of a pirate gang leader known as “Aw Kombe”, who is believed to have been involved in numerous attacks during the height of Somali piracy, there are at least four distinct pirate gangs operating in the semi-autonomous Puntland region, as well as at least one gang operating further south in the Galmudug region, highlighting the decentralised threat. The previous wave of piracy featured a heavy presence of gangs in the central coastal region, around the towns of Eyl and Hobyo. Aw Kombe’s claim indicates the focus may have shifted northwards and that at least some elements of the old pirate groups have been involved in the 2017 spike.

The current surge in activity began in March 2017 with the hijack-for-ransom of the Aris 13, a Comoros-flagged bunkering tanker. The ship and its crew were released after three days following the intervention of the Puntland Maritime Defence Forces and local elders. Galmudug’s minister for ports alleged that Aw Kombe’s gang was responsible for the hijack.

Since the Aris 13 incident, four other hijacks targeting smaller dhow-style vessels have occurred in the region. Financial ransoms were demanded in only two of the hijacks and no settlement payments have been reported. Pirates succeeded in boarding the bulk carrier OS 35 in April before the vessel was secured by the Chinese navy. Three pirates,





including Aw Kombe, were arrested in that incident and subsequently handed over to the Puntland authorities.

In April and May 2017 there were five further attempted hijacks targeting at least two cargo bulk carriers, a chemical tanker, and a combined chemical and oil tanker. There were also at least eight approaches reported by merchant vessels. On 17 May the Indian Navy, when answering a distress call, intercepted a large suspected pirate group and confiscated their weapons and ammunition before releasing the assailants and their vessels.

WHERE?

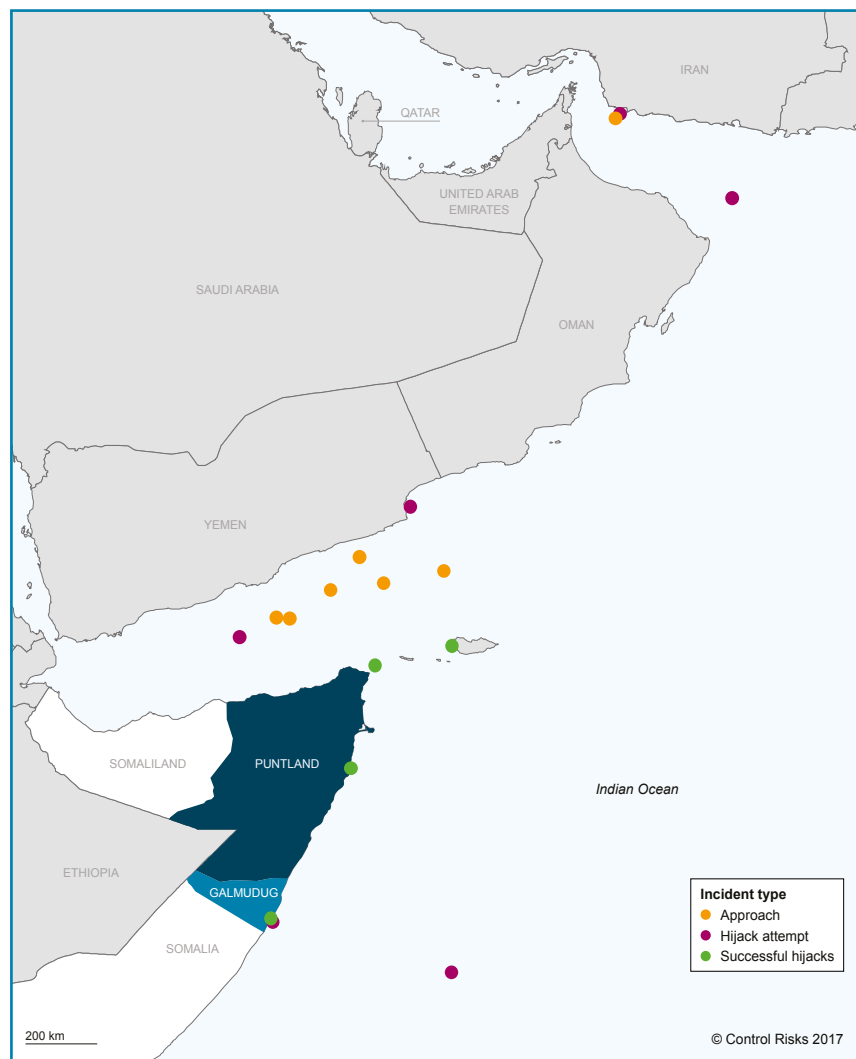
Pirate groups in Puntland and Galmudug are able to strike at greater distances from the coast as they have access to trading dhows and larger fishing vessels, which they acquired through hijack, including an Iranian dhow allegedly hijacked in May. One recent approach targeting a fishing vessel occurred some 670 nm east of the Somali coast. At least two other incidents involving suspected Somali pirates were also recorded in the Gulf of Oman in May. Many of the incidents recorded since April occurred in the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC), where international naval forces conduct the most patrols, however current activity is minimal in comparison to the height of 2011.

HOW LONG?

In hijacks where pirates succeed in capturing and holding a crew, they have not held them for longer than a fortnight. In at least one incident, most of the crew of a dhow, the Casayr II, was dumped onshore by the pirates shortly after the hijack; the dhow was

kept for a short time but eventually abandoned. With successful hijacks occurring only intermittently in the March to May period, more resources, including local clan elders, security forces onshore and naval vessels, could be brought to bear in each incident. This denied the pirates the ability to effectively sequester captured crews or open negotiations with owners.

This is in stark contrast to the fates of captured crews during the high point of Somali piracy. During this period captivity commonly ran into hundreds of days, and ransom demands rose from thousands of US dollars into millions by its end, as the overwhelming volume of incidents left both on- and off-shore security forces struggling to respond.





WHAT NEXT?

The likelihood of piracy and armed robbery in the region returning to 2009-2012 levels is very low; the pirate groups' operational capabilities are much reduced compared to that period. However, the crime is unlikely to disappear completely while the current push and pull factors remain.

Isolated attempts at hijack-for-ransom are expected in the coming weeks and months, although the frequency of incidents will likely decline from early June, as inter-monsoon winds will disrupt the ability of pirate groups to operate far from shore. Another flurry of incidents could accompany the improvement of sea conditions towards the end of the year and beginning of 2018. Pirate groups may also move north to the Gulf of Oman, where at least one Somali group is suspected to have operated this year, seeking calmer waters.

International naval patrols and improved national and local security forces such as the Puntland Maritime Police Force play a role in mitigating the threat, but the most effective short term solution lies in tried and tested ship security measures. For operators who may have drifted from disciplined adherence to the 'BMP4: Best Management Practices for Protection against Somalia Based Piracy', the increase in incidents will encourage them to resume or reinforce these practices. Enhanced security measures include crew drills, the hardening of vessels' citadels, and close liaison with the UKMTO and regional naval forces when transiting through the Gulf of Aden and southern Red Sea. The use of armed security teams will remain a central component of mitigation measures employed by operators, and the recent spike in incidents will serve as a reminder of their value.

Should the continued efforts of shipping companies and security guarantors succeed in stifling the ability of pirate groups to ransom ships, it is likely that the groups' financial backers will divert funds back to other, more lucrative, illicit activities.

Control Risks' Response division and its Special Risks Analysis (SRA) team are the leading source of kidnap-for-ransom and threat extortion research and analysis, and have unparalleled operational experience in the field over the course of four decades. During this time, Response has worked on more than 3,100 incidents in 136 countries around the world, including over 20 cases of Somali piracy, feeding further proprietary insights and context back into the SRA group to inform its analysis.

Control Risks' dedicated team of maritime analysts advise organisations on political, security, operational and integrity risks in the maritime domain. Public source data is complemented and verified using privileged source information gathered from embedded consultants, security teams, country analysts and additional personnel operating in Control Risks' offices and client locations worldwide.

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