

Piracy and terrorism: why Somalia?

With the new film *Captain Phillips* now out on Blu-ray™ and DVD, former kidnap victim Colin Freeman reports on the causes and prevalence of piracy in Somalia



Lawless land: pirates in Somalia

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In *Captain Phillips*, the new Sony Pictures film, now out on Blu-ray™ and DVD, about a US cargo ship hijacked by Somali pirates, a telling conversation takes place between the titular hero and the gang leader who seizes his ship.

“There’s got to be something other than being a fisherman and kidnapping people,” protests Captain Phillips upon being told by his captor that he took up piracy because it paid better than fishing.

“Maybe in America,” comes the abrupt reply.

Like most of the rest of *Captain Phillips*, which recreates the true story of the 2009 hijacking of

the Maersk Alabama and its 20 US crew, this has the ring of authenticity.

Somalia has been the textbook definition of a failed state ever since lapsing into an intractable clan-based civil war in 1991 – events recreated in Hollywood's previous excursion to Somalia, *Black Hawk Down*. With no government and next to no industry, Somalia has raised an entire generation to believe that violence is the rule in life, not the exception.



The outside world was long warned that this might one day mean that Somalia's problems became the rest of the world's. And today they are – be it with the piracy epidemic that has snared thousands of sailors such as Captain Phillips, or the burgeoning threat from Islamic militant groups like al-Shabaab, which claimed responsibility for last month's Nairobi shopping mall massacre.

I have experienced Somalia's chaos at close quarters after being kidnapped with a photographer while reporting on the piracy problem in the northern port of Bossaso in Somalia's Puntland region in late 2008. My photographer and I were taken hostage by a gang of the very men we had come to report on, and held at gunpoint for six weeks in caves outside the city. Like Captain Phillips's ordeal, it was a grim experience – but it also provided an insight into why piracy and terrorism are Somalia's two best-known exports.

The lack of prospects for the average Somali were apparent the moment we arrived in Bossaso, where an ageing Antonov airliner deposits visitors on to a rough landing strip overlooked by

barren mountains. A city of 500,000, it is as poor as anywhere in Africa, a tumbledown collection of breeze-block buildings and dirt roads resembling a shanty town. One of the few thriving local industries was in trafficking stowaways to the Gulf States, a journey that carried a high risk of drowning.

At the time, though, ransom cash from piracy was providing the first boom years in living memory. Smart new villas were popping up amid the squalor, and brand-new SUVs cruised the streets.

“Young people get attracted into this business because there is very high unemployment here

Small wonder that from the minarets of Bossaso’s mosques, local imams had taken to broadcasting messages telling locals not to be tempted to take the pirate coin. And small wonder that few were listening. Those local politicians not on the pirate payroll themselves were desperately worried about the impact on the next generation.

“Young people get attracted into this business because there is very high unemployment here, almost 100 per cent, with no factories or industry,” Mohamed Kalombi, Puntland’s then interior minister, told me. “But now they see the chance to make millions of dollars through crime. With their money, the pirates are buying weapons and even bribing the justice institutions so that they will not be caught.”

Sure enough, down at Bossaso’s docks, local fishermen confirmed that piracy was a temptation. One told me that he earned just \$5 a day if he was lucky enough to land a decent catch. By contrast, those who went out looking to catch ships, rather than tuna or swordfish, could earn tens of thousands of dollars from their share of any ransom deal.

One pirate that we telephoned confirmed: “I became a pirate because I realised it was the only way a Somali like me can make good money. I can afford to buy a new car and home, and when we are back on shore we have big parties, with girls, lots to drink, and plenty of *qhat* [the narcotic leaf chewed by Somalis that also features heavily in the film].”





A couple of weeks later, when we were ourselves in pirate custody, we got a similar story from Fraisal, a teenage orphan who was part of the gang. Even though he was holding us at gunpoint, I could not help feeling a touch of sympathy. With both his parents murdered during the civil war, he had once managed to smuggle himself to Europe, only to be sent back to Somalia after reaching Greece. With the money he hoped to earn from his pirate activities, he was intending to try it again.

Whether Fraisal made it, I have no idea. It is possible that he is in prison now, or dead, as are many pirates who have tangled with foreign navies – and each other – in the ransom bonanza of the last five years. The more successful ones have become folk heroes to some in their communities, enjoying gangsta-rapper style celebrity. The less successful – like the Maersk Alabama's attackers, three of whom were shot dead by US Navy Seals – are simply forgotten. In Somalia, dying young or violently is nothing unusual.

Not everyone on Somalia's coast is a pirate. The vast majority still earn an honest – if meagre – living through fishing or subsistence farming. It is fair to say, though, that many turn a blind eye to the pirates' activities.

Paul Chandler, the British sailor who was hijacked in 2009 along with his wife Rachel, was struck by how no one in the village where he was held seemed to have any concept that kidnapping was wrong. "I remember when I pointed out a goat farmer to one of the pirates, and said 'There goes an honest man,' the reaction was just one of contempt, that the farmer was a nobody."

As such, the supply of young men willing to follow in Fraisal's footsteps is unlikely to diminish. Instead, what has curbed the pirates' activities in recent years is the decision of shipping companies to routinely supply armed guards for crews travelling through pirate waters. There were only four attacks in the first six months of this year, compared to 44 in the corresponding

period last year, although to this day, nearly 100 sailors are still being kept hostage from past hijackings, some of them having spent more than three years as captives.

Last year, Britain hosted a major international summit on Somalia, backed by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, in recognition that the only real way to tackle problems such as al-Shabaab and piracy is to install a stable government. The diplomatic initiative was designed to capitalise on the recent success of the African Union-led force in Mogadishu, which finally succeeded in forcing al-Shabaab from the capital and securing peace.

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Aid workers and diplomats once again feel safe to go there, and today locals gather on the city's vast white beaches for swimming and football. Also returning are Somalis from around the world and with them a sense of cautious hope.

Outside Mogadishu, it is still a different story. Al-Shabaab controls many districts, and up and down Somalia's vast pirate coastline, there remains neither law and order nor much in the way of prospects. As the recent attack in Nairobi showed, the same hopelessness that drives many of Somalia's young men to take up the skull and crossbones may also drive them to the standard of militant Islam.

There still aren't many options between being a fisherman and kidnapping people.

Tough justice?

Three years ago, I sat in a maximum-security courtroom in the port city of Rotterdam as five pirates arrested by the Dutch navy went on trial for trying to attack a freighter ship. The Dutch authorities had taken them back to Europe charged with the 17th-century offence of “sea robbery”, hoping to make an international example of them.

The only problem was, it was the wrong kind of example.

For, unlike Captain Phillips' sole surviving hijacker, Abduhl Wali-i-Musi, who is now serving 33 years in a notoriously tough US jail, the stiffest penalty on offer was five years in a Dutch prison, where they would have a private cell with television and shower.

What was more, upon completing their sentences, they would be able to apply for asylum to remain in Holland, which was almost certain to be granted as the European Union regards Somalia as too dangerous for deportation.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the defendants were not particularly regretting being caught.

“When I first spoke to my client, he said being here was like heaven,” lawyer Willem-Jan Ausma, who represents 27-year-old Farah Ahmed Yusuf, told me. “For the first time in his life he didn’t feel he was in danger, and he was in a modern prison with the first modern toilet and shower that he’d ever had.”

The irony of the situation is that many Somalis take up piracy in the first place in order to finance passage to Europe on a people-smuggler’s boat. Here, albeit unintentionally, the Dutch authorities were facilitating the journey for them.

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