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The Pirates Are Winning! [October 14, 2010](#) [Jeffrey Gettleman](#)

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[Somalia: The New Barbary? Piracy and Islam in the Horn of Africa](#) by Martin N. Murphy / Columbia University Press, 179 pp., \$26.50 (to be published on November 23)

[Warriors: Life and Death Among the Somalis](#)

by Gerald Hanley

London: Eland, 228 pp., \$32.95 (distributed in the US by Dufour)



Jehad Nga/The New York Times/Redux

Pirate militiamen at a port in Hobyo, Somalia, August 20, 2010

Abshir Boyah is one of Somalia's pirate chieftains. Last spring, he took me to lunch at a small restaurant directly across the street from the presidential palace of the Puntland semiautonomous regional government. Boyah has hijacked dozens of ships and is a member of a secretive council of pirates called "The Corporation." He is six foot four, very thin, with a long, handsome face, brilliant white teeth, and a booming, supremely confident laugh.

The minute we walked into the restaurant, he was surrounded by admirers. Before we sat down at a plastic table for our meal of spaghetti and camel meat, Boyah must have shaken half a dozen hands. He seemed to have excellent relations with high-ranking officials in the Puntland "government"—a limited, clan-based authority in northern Somalia—including a police commander who sat next to him and called him "cousin." Boyah joked that his eating with white men was like "the cat eating with the mice." It was becoming clear that Boyah was not simply operating in the open. In this part of Somalia, he was a celebrity.

Boyah and his comrades (many, in true pirate spirit, have distinctive nicknames: Big Mouth, White Butt, Small Butt, Silver Tooth, Red Teeth, Abdi the Liar) are brash, candid, and surprisingly accessible—most Somali pirate gangs even have an official pirate spokesman. By their own admission, they are driven by one thing only: cash. But the flourishing criminal enterprise they have built along some of the world's busiest shipping lanes has had a wider effect. Nothing in recent years has grabbed international attention and focused it squarely on Somalia—not famines, relentless civil war, or even the first American suicide bomber, who blew himself up in Somalia last year—more than the true-life tales of twenty-first-century buccaneers who swing grappling hooks over the sides of the largest ships in the sea, climb on board dripping wet and heavily armed, and hold crews hostage for months, until millions of dollars in ransom are literally dropped from the sky.



For the past twenty years, since its central government collapsed, Somalia has become one of the prime examples in modern history of a country without a state. Nothing seems to work. Not American soldiers storming ashore in 1992 to take on the warlords (they left two years later, deeply humiliated by the “Black Hawk Down” fiasco). Not the seven thousand African Union peacekeepers who fight in the ruined streets of Mogadishu today. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost to starvation and war. And the violence keeps mounting, most recently in what is ostensibly a religious war between a moderate Islamist government that gets millions of dollars of Western aid but controls almost no territory and a radical Islamist insurgency egged on by al-Qaeda. Deep-seated clan rivalries and war profiteers eagerly feed this bloodshed. Meanwhile the perfect conditions for piracy prevail: anarchy, a cold war legacy that has left Somalia armed to the teeth, and a 1,900-mile coastline abutting the Gulf of Aden, which 20,000 ships traverse each year.

Of course, there have been other weak or relatively weak states with strategic coastlines, such as Nigeria or Indonesia, where lawlessness has spawned piracy, and pirates have utilized many of the same tactics found in Somalia, like the grappling hooks, the speedy skiffs, and the so-called mother ships. But Somalia is different in an important way, which also explains why characters like Boyah have proved so hardy. The pirates of Somalia have an entire country nearly the size of Texas to use as a sanctuary. They hijack ships, sometimes as far out as one thousand miles from shore, and then steer them to well-known pirate dens where they dine on freshly slaughtered goat while conducting ransom negotiations.

For the hostages, it can be a long, hellish wait. Paul and Rachel Chandler, a retired British couple, have been held in a thorny, sweltering village a few miles from the Somali coast for almost a year, since their sailboat was seized in October 2009 during what was supposed to be their “trip of a lifetime.” In 2008, when more than a dozen hijacked ships, with more than three hundred hostages, were anchored off the coast of Somalia, Pottengal Mukundan, director of the International Maritime Bureau in London, told me, “You can see the images of these ships on Google Earth. Nowhere else in the world would this be tolerated.”

More than thirty countries have dispatched gunboats to Somalia’s waters, but Mukundan doesn’t have much hope that they can dissuade the pirates, since there are more than two million square miles to patrol. Foreign countries have been reluctant to attack pirate dens on land, because it’s far less complicated and much cheaper to pay up. In each case, forking over the ransom may make sense. But when this becomes a common practice, it simply draws more young Somalis into the sea-jacking business and makes the pirates bolder and greedier.

Somali pirates will strike anything: one-thousand-foot-long oil tankers; tiny sailboats with three people on board; old-fashioned, crescent-sailed Arab dhows; freighters crammed with emergency food; freighters crammed with weapons; a tanker carrying extremely flammable benzene that American authorities worried could be converted into an enormous, floating bomb. The pirates have even attacked navy ships, apparently by mistake.

No one knows exactly how much they have netted in the past few years in ransoms but it is safe to assume at least \$100 million. Often the booty makes them giddy. After a parachute packed with \$3 million drifted down to the deck of the *Sirius Star*, a

Saudi supertanker that a band of young Somali pirates hijacked in late 2008, the pirates divvied up the cash and impetuously sped away in their dinghies, in the middle of a squall. Several capsized and drowned. One dead pirate washed up on the beach with more than \$150,000 in his pockets.

This excess has created a budding pirate culture. Pirate weddings are elaborate two- or three-day affairs, stretching deep into the night, with bands—and brides—flown in from outside Somalia and convoys of expensive 4x4 trucks. The prettiest young women in pirate towns dream of a pirate groom; little boys can hardly wait until they are old enough to sling an AK-47 over their shoulder and head out to sea. In these places, the entire local economy revolves around hijacking ships, with hundreds of men, women, and children employed as guards, scouts, cooks, deckhands, mechanics, skiff-builders, accountants, and tea-makers.

There's no doubt that in Somalia, crime pays—it's about the only industry that does. There is even a functioning pirate stock exchange in Xarardheere, where locals buy "shares" in seventy-two individual pirate "companies" and get a respectable return if the company is successful. Most of the money, though, is frittered away. Boyah, who personally has made hundreds of thousands of dollars if not millions, asked me for cigarettes when I met him. When I asked what happened to all his cash, he explained: "When someone who never had money suddenly gets money, it just goes." He also said that because of the extended network of relatives and clansmen, "it's not like three people split a million bucks. It's more like three hundred."

Over the past two years or so, some countries have tried to take a tougher line. There was a time, not so long ago, when merchant crews under attack would pelt pirates with tomatoes or squirt them with hoses. The Indian navy recently sank a pirate ship, killing several pirates and their hostages. In early September, US Marine commandos succeeded in capturing nine Somali pirates who had hijacked a German cargo ship off the coast of Yemen. Many merchant vessels now sail with privately hired armed guards. The pirates are learning that it is getting more difficult to hijack ships, and according to recent United Nations information, their success rate has slipped from 63 percent of attempted hijackings to 20 percent. Dozens of pirates have been captured and taken to Kenya, Paris, Amsterdam, and even New York for prosecution, though even more have simply been detained, disarmed, and sent back to the sea. Last year, Navy SEALs killed three pirates holding an American captive in a lifeboat. But the hijackings go on. As of mid-August, Somali pirates had commandeered thirty-one ships in 2010, which is roughly on track to match last year's catch.

The Horn of Africa, that sharp lump of the African continent that juts into the Indian Ocean and nearly touches the Arabian peninsula, is one of the least democratic, most famine-prone, and most violent regions on the planet—as the past twenty years in Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan have shown. The US and USSR perceived the Horn to be highly strategic territory and so it became a cold war battlefield. Enormous quantities of weapons flowed into deeply impoverished countries and the Horn's dictators soon learned that they didn't have to build institutions or develop a persuasive ideology to maintain power. They simply got in touch with Washington or Moscow and asked for more guns.

Somalia was about the worst example of cold war fickleness. First a pawn of the USSR, it was home to a sprawling Soviet guided-missile cruiser base, located in Berbera, along the Gulf of Aden. I visited the vast underground bunkers in which the

Russians used to store ammunition and the cobwebbed workshops, now looted, where the Russian sailors once worked. At the time, the United States was supporting Somalia's arch-rival, Ethiopia, as its client state.

But all that abruptly changed in the mid-1970s when Ethiopian army officers murdered their longtime king, Haile Selassie, and the country tilted to Marxist rule. The two superpowers switched, with the Soviets embracing Ethiopia and the United States moving into Somalia. More arms flooded in and the propped-up rulers in both places became all the more despotic. In 1991, as soon as the cold war was declared over, the regimes in both Somalia and Ethiopia quickly crumbled.

Somalia's dictator, Siad Barre, had been living on borrowed time for years. Clan militias were chipping away at state authority throughout the 1980s and by the end of that decade, President Barre was derisively referred to as "the mayor of Mogadishu." That was about all the territory he controlled.

Somalia has always been a difficult place to rule, despite the fact that it is one of the most homogeneous countries on the planet. Nearly all of its estimated seven million to eight million people share the same language (Somali), religion (Sunni Islam), culture, and ethnicity. But Somalis are divided into a dizzying number of clans, subclans, and sub-subclans. The Italians and the British colonized separate parts of the territory, but their efforts to impose Western laws never really worked. Disputes tended to be resolved by clan elders. "Kill me and you will suffer the wrath of my entire clan"—that, to many people, was law and order. The places where the local ways were disturbed the least, like British-ruled Somaliland, have fared much better in the long run than south-central Somalia, where an Italian-run colonial administration supplanted the role of traditional elders. South-central Somalia continues to fester as a source of bloodshed, Islamist radicalism, and piracy. Somaliland just held a peaceful election and—even rarer in Africa—a peaceful transfer of power.



Mike King

In his new book *Somalia: The New Barbary?*, Martin Murphy, an adviser to the US Navy and a visiting fellow at the Corbett Centre for Maritime Policy Studies at King's College, University of London, refers to some colonial records to show that pirates in

the Gulf of Aden were striking dhows and fishing vessels back in the 1950s. Before that, it seems Somalis were content to pick through shipwrecks. According to Robert L. Hess, in *Italian Colonialism in Somalia*,¹ the sultans of what is now Puntland ran a “well-organized industry of salvage operations” in the 1800s, stripping clean European ships that ran aground along the treacherous coast of Cape Guardafui, the horn of the Horn.

Somalia is a long, thin coastal state, but most Somalis are not seafaring people. Even when it was somewhat stable, Somalia never developed much of a fishing industry, despite the fact that the Somali seas are teeming with tuna, shark, lobster, deep-water shrimp, and whitefish. Traditional Somali culture is rooted in pastoralism and goats and camels and the nomadic quest of finding the next green pasture. “Fish eater” in Somali is a derogatory term. The most stunning scene in *Warriors*, Gerald Hanley’s classic book on Somalia, first published in 1971, describes a young man from the interior seeing the ocean for the first time:

When Mohamed got down off his truck he was paralysed, rooted there in the sand and trembling from head to foot as he watched and listened to the great tumult of the ocean rolling to him. He had never visualized anything like it and he could not speak. Even the askaris [local soldiers] were silent as they watched him study it all with his rolling, worried eyes....For me it was one of the strangest experiences I have ever had, seeing a desert savage shivering in front of the ocean for the first time, as if expecting the ground to melt and swallow him up at any moment. We must all have been like that once, in a time of thunder or storm, a million years ago in innocence.

While Somalis may not have prized their seas, others do. During peak fishing seasons, trawlers from around the globe converge here. Many use dirty fishing tactics, like dynamiting reefs or employing giant, waterborne vacuums to suck up everything from the ocean floor—the fish, the coral, the rocks, the plants—decimating not just that year’s catch but future generations as well.

Many pirates I have interviewed spoke of their humiliation as fishermen after their run-ins with foreign fishing boats. They say the bigger boats cut their nets and boxed out their skiffs. They say the foreign fishing boats, years ago, before the pirates were pirates and they were simply poor fishermen, even fired guns at them. The pirates also complain about barrels of toxic waste washing ashore, illegally dumped a few miles out by foreign companies exploiting the fact that Somalia has no government to chase down the dumpers or file claims in international court. Maritime organizations in East Africa have corroborated these accounts.

Boyah, who is known throughout Somalia as a pioneer pirate, was born in the coastal town of Eyl, around 1966, according to documents from the US Treasury Department, which recently froze his assets. He told me that his family had been relocated to the coast from the hinterland as part of a government program to help drought victims. He dropped out of school when he was around eight and worked as a cook on a fishing boat. Then he became a fisherman. He hijacked his first ship in 1993, a fishing trawler that had illegally entered Somalia’s waters.

Boyah said that Somalia’s piracy trade began when fishermen like him armed themselves and forcefully boarded illegal trawlers to charge a “fine,” usually no more than a few thousand dollars. But the fishermen soon realized that the fishing fine was

more lucrative than the fish. An effort by the Puntland government in 1999 to team up with a British company, Hart Security, to crack down on illegal fishing seems to have backfired and simply put more armed men on the seas. By the mid-2000s, many part-time fishermen had graduated to full-time piracy. Thanks to Boyah, his hometown of Eyl was emerging as the world's new piracy capital.

The pirates soon organized themselves into gangs or "companies." They took names like "Somali Marines," "Central Somali Coast Guard," "Defenders of Somali Territorial Waters," and even the "Ocean Salvation Corps." In the past, the pirates have tried to present themselves as guardians of Somalia's coastline, a claim that seems increasingly ridiculous since they venture hundreds of miles out, now attacking ships closer to India than Africa. The truth is they are simply an offshore version of Somalia's chaos-bred thuggery. For the past twenty years, in the vacuum of central authority, charismatic men who have learned to exploit clan connections, easy access to weapons, and a large pool of unemployed and uneducated youth have risen to dominate Somalia's economy and its poisonous politics. They are the gun smugglers, the drug runners, the human traffickers, the importers of expired baby formula, the squatter landlords who expropriate former government buildings and lease them to displaced families.

One of Somalia's biggest problems is this deeply entrenched and quite powerful class of war profiteers. They have been feeding off anarchy for so long that they refuse to let go. They will fight against any attempt to reestablish a government, no matter what that government is. "Taxes are annoying," explained one olive oil exporter in Mogadishu about why he was buying missiles for insurgents.²

The pirates have figured out a way to graft their criminally driven local economy onto the global one. Initially, they simply positioned their skiffs in the congested Gulf of Aden and waited. One of the pirates who hijacked the MV *Faina*, a Ukrainian freighter carrying thirty-three T-72 Soviet-made battle tanks, told me that his crew was just bobbing along a busy shipping channel when they spotted a big, lumbering, blue and white ship, with ropes dangling down the side. Nowadays, though, with the increased naval presence in the Gulf of Aden, the pirates are moving farther south and farther east, using mother ships (usually hijacked trawlers) as floating bases to extend their range. The area between the Seychelles Islands and Tanzania is now a prime hunting ground.

Once on board, the pirates go directly to the bridge, hold the crew at gunpoint, and typically lock them up in the steamy crew quarters. But Somali pirates almost never intentionally hurt their hostages. Many are governed by a strict code of conduct that fines gunmen for abusing captives. Boyah said that there was even a printed copy of these rules, a so-called "Pirate's Handbook." The pirates seem to realize that the minute they start harming or killing captives they give Western powers the rationale to attack their onshore bases. Until then, the world is content to play an increasingly expensive game of cat and mouse. Some people, though, are losing patience. Last April, Nicolas Sarkozy ordered French commandos to storm a hijacked sailing yacht with a French family on board. The commandos shot dead two pirates, captured three more, and freed the ship, but they also killed the father.

Foreign navies have nabbed countless young Somali men cruising around in skiffs with heavy weapons and no fishing tackle. But that's usually not enough evidence to charge them. They were arrested too early. But once the pirates have boarded a vessel it's too late to try to arrest them, because of the risks. Under international

conventions that go back hundreds of years, just about any country can try a suspected pirate caught on the high seas. Western navies have delivered more than one hundred suspects to Kenya, which initially agreed to prosecute them. But Kenya complained that the Western nations had not provided the promised funding, and many of those cases have stalled.

Martin Murphy seems convincing when he writes that despite a lot of hype, Somali piracy remains a homegrown, rudimentary, low-tech, and somewhat wild business. There have been many rumors about clean-cut executives in Nairobi, Dubai, and even London running the pirate rings, but I've found no evidence of this. There was talk of the pirates shrewdly investing their ransom profits in Nairobi's real estate market and using night vision goggles and even a special paint to make their skiffs invisible to radar. When I asked another pirate boss, Mohamed Abdi, also known as Af Weyne, or Big Mouth, about the invisible paint, he looked hard at me. My translator had to repeat the question. Twice. And then Big Mouth threw his head back and laughed. "Total BS," he said. He found it equally hilarious when I mentioned that the UN was considering freezing pirate assets. "What assets?" he said.

Murphy's relatively short book—179 pages, without footnotes—provides a serviceable version of recent Somali history and how it has given rise to piracy. He tells some little-known stories, like how an Islamist sheikh was amputating hands in Mogadishu as far back as 1994. He makes a central point when he writes that the pirates

prey in the main on the weak, lame, inattentive or unlucky.... Valuable ships with motivated crews more often than not took the precautions that kept them out of danger.

There's absolutely no reason, Murphy points out, to have sophisticated warships that cost hundreds of millions of dollars running piracy patrols. Why not find some private security outfit to take this over? Isn't Blackwater, now called Xe, still in business?

Still, *Somalia: The New Barbary?* feels thin. You almost get the sense reading it that Murphy has never set foot in Somalia. Some chapters draw closely on wire service reports and newspaper stories (some of them mine). He fails to supply new information on Puntland, where at least some government officials seem to be in cahoots with the pirates, though no one, including UN investigators, has turned up anything solid.

Yet he is right that the "parallels between Somali piracy and the Barbary corsairs are pale at best." The Barbary pirates were Muslims from a messy patch of Africa, harassing and eluding the world's greatest powers. But they were extensions of official policy, not expressions of anarchy. Tripoli, for instance, had an ambassador stationed in London—who met with Jefferson and Adams, no less. The pirates worked for a government; the Barbary rulers who commissioned them to rob, pillage, and kidnap got a cut. The Western nations' response was to pay "tribute," a fancy word for blackmail. Yet one lesson from the Barbary days that shouldn't be dismissed is how the piracy was finally stopped: the young American navy bombarded Tripoli and the French invaded Algiers. The solution was on land. The ocean is just too big.

There's very little hope, in the near future, of the transitional government in Mogadishu becoming strong enough to wipe out the pirates' bases. The government is simply trying to stay alive. The hard-line Islamist insurgents who control much of

Somalia have flirted with dismantling the piracy business, but the money is too good. One group, Hizbul Islam, recently moved into Xarardheere and now gets \$40,000 from each ransom. The more powerful insurgent group al-Shabab made a deal with the pirates in which they will not interfere with the pirates' business in exchange for 5 percent of the ransoms. This seems to be the beginning of the West's worst Somali nightmare. The country's two top exports—piracy and Islamist radicalism—are at last joining hands.

Under growing international pressure and increased grumbling from Islamist sheikhs who say piracy is *haram*, or forbidden, security forces in Puntland arrested Boyah in May. But he hasn't been charged yet. Many people believe he never will be. Among other things, Boyah and Puntland's president are said to hail from the same sub-clan. In Somalia, that is often what counts.

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