



# MSR Viewpoint

## Searching for a Somali Coastguard

By James M. Bridger

Maritime Security Consultant, Delex Systems

*The Somali pirate business model has been dealt a severe blow by the combined efforts of international naval operations, the shipping industry's implementation of best management practices, and the increased use of armed guards aboard vessels.*

*Having failed to hijack and ransom a commercial vessel in over 20 months, pirate gangs are now diversifying into other illicit ventures such as arms smuggling and protection services for illegal fishing fleets.*



**Maritime  
Security  
Review**

***“We don’t consider ourselves sea bandits.  
Think of us like a coastguard.”***

***Sugule Ali, Somali Pirate***

**The Somali pirate business model has been dealt a severe blow by the combined efforts of international naval operations, the shipping industry’s implementation of best management practices, and the increased use of armed guards aboard vessels.**

**Just over a dozen ships were attacked by Somali pirates in 2013, according to the International Maritime Bureau, down from a high of over 200 attacks in 2011.**

**Having failed to hijack and ransom a commercial vessel in over 20 months, pirate gangs are now diversifying into other illicit ventures such as arms smuggling and protection services for illegal fishing fleets.**

While Somali piracy may be contained, however, it has not been eradicated. The underlying conditions that gave rise to piracy persist and the criminal networks that professionalized it remain intact and largely unscathed.

Most notably, a long-term solution, which empowers Somali security forces to suppress piracy (and also illegal fishing, terrorism, and human/drug/weapons trafficking), remains elusive.

International donors and private security companies have engaged in several different initiatives to build coastguard capacity in Somalia over the last decade, but few have shown sustainable gains.

As new actors are now poised to enter this field, this article examines the trials of building maritime security capacity in the country most desperately in need of it.

Lessons are drawn from past successes and failures with a view towards informing future policy.

## The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

An onshore solution to Somali piracy has been, at least rhetorically, a focus of the international community since the crime wave reached crisis-level proportions in 2008.

While significant progress has been made in developing the maritime security capacity of regional states, Somalia itself remains largely sidelined.

Multilateral initiatives such as the Djibouti Code of Conduct and a UN trust fund for Somalia have solicited funds and policy prescriptions for a Somali coastguard, but have yet to contribute to a training or procurement program.

NATO’s Operation Ocean Shield has conducted training observation and joint exercises with states such as Yemen, Oman and Djibouti, but its engagement with authorities in Somalia remains confined to humanitarian assistance and consultation.

The region’s largest capacity building initiative is the European Union’s EUCAP NESTOR, which has provided ongoing coastguard and judicial training to authorities in Djibouti and the Seychelles since 2012. However, Somalia’s fragile political arrangement and unstable security situation has inhibited the EU from carrying out its mandate to assist in the development of the country’s coastal police forces. Capacity building in Somalia’s autonomous regions has thus been limited to single judicial training workshop in Puntland and a four-day ‘evidence handling for maritime crimes’ program in Somaliland.



Security risks, arms embargo restrictions, and the absence of legitimate local partners have prevented national governments from deploying maritime trainers in Somalia. These same factors, however, have carved out a unique niche for private security companies (PSCs) eager to venture where others are unwilling.

### Plenty of Contracts with Little Result

Somalia's successive transitional federal governments have been the focus of several attempted coastguard projects, all of which have failed to materialize. In 2005, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) signed a \$50-million contract with U.S. security firm Top Cat to hunt for pirate 'motherships' and train a Somali coastguard.

The U.S. State Department blocked the deployment, however, because it was judged to violate the 1992 arms embargo on Somalia as well as U.S. arms-trafficking regulations.

The TFG signed a similar deal with the French PSC Secopex in 2008, but the required funding—assumed to come from the international community—never arrived.

A failure to secure international funding also aborted the coastguard procurement plans of Nairobi-based security provider Halliday Finch in 2012.

In late July 2013, the new Somali Federal Government (SFG) announced that it had signed a deal with Dutch private maritime security provider Atlantic Marine and Offshore Group to establish a coastguard to combat piracy and secure Somalia's exclusive economic zone.

Though no timetable or funding source has been announced, the deal has already provoked a hostile response from the autonomous states of Puntland and Somaliland, who view the contract as an infringement on the sovereignty of their territorial waters.

Puntland officials described the contract as "unacceptable, inapplicable and unsuitable," and proceeded to sever ties with the SFG two days after its announcement.

The Director General of Somaliland's Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources, Mohamed Elmi Aden, likewise warned that the Dutch company should "stay clear of involvement in Somaliland's territorial waters."

The contested ownership of Somalia's recently explored oil deposits has further stoked tension between the SFG and the autonomous regions and is likely a driving factor behind Mogadishu's renewed desire to exert control over the country's maritime domain.

### Started from the Bottom

Somaliland and Puntland's hostility towards a Mogadishu-based coastguard in part stems from the fact that they have already, with external assistance, established their own marine police forces.

In 2006, the self-declared state of Somaliland engaged the services of Norwegian PSC Nordic Crisis Management (NCM) to increase safety, security and revenue at the port of Berbera by implementing International Ship and Port Facility Security Code standards.

The firm's contract also involved training Somaliland's harbor security and marine police forces and consulting on coastguard procurement. The fact that organized piracy did not take root in Somaliland and that NCM was able to complete their five-year contract without serious interruption attests to the success of the project.





Image courtesy of Triton International (<http://tritoninternational ltd.com>)

Private security experts have attributed this feat to the stable funding the project received from the Norwegian government and NCM's ability to maintain good relations with government and opposition authorities (enabling the contract to survive a change in government in 2010) and to avoid becoming involved in clan/political disputes.

The Somaliland coastguard's popular support has also enabled authorities to conduct community intelligence-driven counter-piracy operations onshore, preventing would-be pirate groups from launching to sea.

From 2009 to 2011, Somaliland contracted a second PSC, the British company Triton International, to further train and mentor its coastguard. The tiny coastguard has managed to arrest dozens of suspected pirates, illegal fishing vessels and smugglers in recent years, despite operating with only a handful of dilapidated patrol boats.

Somaliland's lack of international recognition has presented a number of unique challenges for its coastguard, notes Triton International's CEO Simon Jones, as investors and insurers are reluctant to deal with an unrecognized government.

It was ultimately due to a lack of funding that Triton was unable to implement a more ambitious capacity building for the Somaliland coastguard.

The neighboring autonomous state of Puntland has also engaged several foreign PSCs to help build its maritime

security capacity, with a mixed record of gains and setbacks. In 1999, the Puntland government contracted the British PSC Hart Security to help suppress illegal fishing and build up the capacity of the local coastguard.

Though it achieved some success in curtailing maritime crime, Hart was forced to withdrawal from Puntland in the face of an internal civil conflict in 2001-2002, a fight in which its own recruits were split by opposing clan loyalties.

The company was soon replaced by the Somali-Canadian Coast Guard (SomCan), a locally based outfit with strong ties to the sub-clan of the newly reinstated Puntland president, Abdullahi Yusuf.

Lacking an external financier, SomCan's contract was funded through the sale of fishing licenses to foreign fleets.

This arrangement became problematic, according to Abdiwahid Mahamed Hersi, former Director General of Puntland's Ministry of Fisheries, as SomCan focused on "keeping the security of their own licensed ships, instead of the security of the sea."

Under one such arrangement from 2002 to 2005, SomCan reportedly posted armed guards directly to the vessels of Thai Sirichai Fisheries and was in turn provided with coastguard uniforms by the company.

This apparent nepotism led to clashes between coastguards and local fishermen from different clan backgrounds. SomCan's restrictively close links with a single sub-clan is regarded as the seed of its downfall, as the company's contract did not survive a change in presidency in 2005.



Image courtesy of Triton International (<http://tritoninternational ltd.com>)



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A much more ambitious project was born in 2010 when the government of Puntland president Abdirahman Mohamud Farole entered a contract with the South Africa-owned PSC Saracen International (later Sterling Corporate Services) to train and procure equipment and vehicles for a large Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF).

Unlike previous initiatives in Puntland, the PMPF was financed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), allowing it to quickly grow to a force of some 500 marines supported by a fleet of small ships, aircraft, and armored vehicles.

After engaging in a number of humanitarian projects, the PMPF commenced security operations in March 2012, disrupting pirate bases across the remote Bari and Bargaal regions. This allowed the government to enter negotiations with local authorities and denied pirates their onshore sanctuary, contributing to a dramatic decline in Puntland-based piracy.

In late December 2012, the PMPF succeed in rescuing 22 sailors held hostage aboard the MV Iceberg, a vessel held captive for almost three years. Though the marines have used their small fleet to go after smugglers and illegal fishing vessels, the PMPF's terrestrial focus distinguishes it from previous coastguard efforts.

While operationally successful, the PMPF suffered several political and financial setbacks. The United Nations Somalia and Eritrea Monitoring Group alleged that the force was in violation of the 1992 arms embargo on Somalia because of the vehicles and equipment procured by Saracen/Sterling and the UAE's failure to disclose its financial support to the UN Security Council.

In June 2012, the UAE froze funding for the PMPF, leading to the exit of Sterling Corporate Services and the temporary halt of operations.

UAE financing has since resumed, but there have been concerns that the PMPF has become entrenched under the personal control of the Farole administration and has been used, on at least one occasion, as tool of political oppression.

The South African-mentored marines have also become embroiled in the Puntland government's conflict with al-Shabaab militants, using their expat-piloted helicopters to provide air support during several skirmishes in early 2013.

In apparent act of retribution on December 5, 2013, militants believed to be al-Shabaab detonated a car bomb against a PMPF convoy in the economic hub of Bosaso, resulting in eight casualties.

On January 8, 2014, president Farole was defeated in his bid for reelection by former TFG prime minister Abdiweli Ali Gaas.

With the PMPF's future role and structure now in question, both the EU and UN Monitoring Group have expressed hope that Somalia's most capable marine police force will be integrated into a Somalia-wide security regime.

### Lessons Learned

With donor states and PSCs now announcing renewed commitments to help build a Somali coastguard, several lessons can be gleaned from past failures and successes.

First, capacity-building efforts should not take a top-down, Mogadishu-centric approach. All past attempts to do so have failed, and the most recent initiative by Atlantic Marine Offshore Group appears poised to damage fragile relations between the SFG and the country's autonomous regions.

While the SFG does require its own maritime police forces, these should be built up in tandem with support to existing coastguard forces in Somaliland, Puntland, and other federal states.

While their operations and areas of responsibility would be autonomous, it is important that federal maritime security programs be coordinated together with a future view towards further integration.

While donor states and PSCs must be careful to balance relations between the SFG and Somalia's autonomous states, they must also seek to manage or avoid potential conflicts within them.

Both Hart and SomCan's contracts in Puntland were brought down by political impediments and inter-clan conflict. This offers a warning for the PMPF, as the appointment of president Farole's son as the force's commander is reportedly a source of factional tension within the region.

Somaliland offers a positive lesson, as NCM was able to continue operations despite a change in government because it had made a prior effort to build relations with opposition parties.

Somalia and its regions have a great need for maritime security forces, but are unable to fund their training and provision with minimal government budgets.

An effective coastguard requires not only boats, but also communication equipment, radar, command and control facilities, and air support; all of which can be prohibitively expensive.

Several Mogadishu-based coastguard contracts (Top Cat, Secopex, Halliday Finch) have failed to launch because there was no outside party ready to fund their large budgets.

An often-tried scheme is to fund coastguard operations through the sale of foreign fishing licenses, but this risks exacerbating political/clan tensions by placing a revenue generating activity under the control of one group at the expense of another.

A more stable option, as witnessed by the PMPF in Puntland and NCM in Somaliland, is for an external donor state (or intentional organization) to fund capacity building projects as part of a larger development/security agenda.

It is important that financing remain consistent, however, as there are several past examples of trained coastguards turning to piracy or other criminal activity once their wages disappeared.

Finally, it is imperative that efforts to build up maritime security forces in Somalia are enmeshed in larger peace-building and governance initiatives.

NCM's contract in Somaliland, for example, succeeded not only in repelling pirates, but also in increasing

revenue and trade at the port of Berbera, ultimately allowing the World Food Program to use it as a hub for regional aid shipments.

The vehicle procurement provided to the PMPF similarly allowed it to deliver humanitarian assistance to remote regions that had been largely inaccessible to the central government.

There is no shortage of donor states (the UAE, UK, Norway, and Japan in particular) and international organizations (the EU, NATO, IMO, and Djibouti Code of Conduct) with a pronounced willingness to help develop Somalia's coastguard capacity.

Though national coastguard or naval trainers are unlikely to set foot in Somalia, PSCs have demonstrated their eagerness to accept adequate compensation for this inherent risk.

As new capacity-building efforts commence in Somalia, they will not be entering the anarchic wasteland that the country is often portrayed to be.

Pockets of onshore and littoral security have already emerged in Somaliland and Puntland and can be further strengthened by coordinated international effort.

The challenge will be greater, but not insurmountable, in areas where pirate authority still holds sway, such as Hobyo and Harardhere, and in the politically contested southern port of Kismayo.

With Somalia's pirate gangs on the back foot, the time to solidify these gains is now. International organizations, donor states, PSCs, and local authorities must work together to ensure that legitimate coastguards, not pirates calling themselves such, are left in control of Somalia's waters.

#### **About the Author:**

James M. Bridger is Maritime Security Consultant and piracy specialist with Delex Systems Inc.

The opinions and views expressed in this post are his alone and are presented in his personal capacity.

James can be reached for comment or question at [jbridger@delex.com](mailto:jbridger@delex.com)



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