Counter-Piracy in the Arabian Sea: Challenges and Opportunities for GCC Action

By Rick “Ozzie” Nelson and Scott Goossens

Organized piracy has become a major threat to regional trade and maritime security in the wider Arabian Sea, costing the global economy between $7 and $12 billion per year. In the Gulf of Aden, the southern entry point to the Suez Canal, acts of piracy are so frequent that the area has become known as “Pirate Alley.” This body of water, already the most dangerous in the world for piracy, has grown increasingly more treacherous as hijackings, kidnappings, and extortion have proliferated over the past several years. With each success, pirates grow ever more emboldened, particularly as international efforts to implement a comprehensive counter-piracy strategy continue to flounder.

Piracy not only threatens to disrupt maritime trade in the region that Gulf economies depend on, it also undermines confidence in the ability of regional governments to address security challenges in their own “backyard.” The problem provides a unique opportunity for local actors, most importantly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, to demonstrate initiative and exercise regional leadership by taking decisive action against this growing threat.

Pirate Operations, Tactics, and Motivations

Pirates have been operating freely off the southeastern shores of the Horn of Africa since the collapse of Somalia’s central government more than 20 years ago. Local law enforcement has remained either absent, corruptible, or ineffective. As a result the frequency, range, and aggressiveness of pirate attacks have increased in recent years. In the spring and summer of 2008, pirates expanded their reach by shifting their activities north into the Gulf of...
Aden and Arabian Sea. By September 2008—only nine months into the year—the International Maritime Bureau, a maritime crime watchdog group, had reported an increase of over 60 percent in attacks or attempted attacks by pirates in the Gulf of Aden from 2007 totals.

It is estimated that about 50 known pirate bands, comprising 2,000 to 3,000 pirates, operate out of six known pirate bases along the coast of Somalia. In the first quarter of 2011, 97 attempted attacks were registered, compared to 35 for the same period the previous year. Success has encouraged the development of new tactics that allow the pirates to increase their operational range. For example, the use of “mother ships,” usually hijacked vessels serving as floating logistics bases, has enabled pirates to carry out attacks further from shore and stay at sea for extended periods of time.

In the past, pirates operated primarily along the coastline, which provided a safe retreat for their skiffs. Today, with their increased confidence, deepening experience, and improved tactics, pirates have attacked ships more than 1,000 miles off the coast, increasing their operational range from an area previously about the size of Texas to an area now closer to the size of the continental United States. In one episode in April 2010, pirates attacked a vessel 1,300 nautical miles east of the Horn of Africa, at a point closer to India than to Somalia. Moreover, since 2008, pirate attacks have evolved from relatively unsophisticated raids to well-coordinated attacks that employ capable intelligence networks and fairly sophisticated technologies such as radar and GPS. The use of heavier weaponry, such as machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, has allowed pirate bands to shift their operations from hijacking small vessels to commandeering more lucrative cargo ships, container vessels, and oil tankers. Regardless of the size of the vessel, pirate bands typically share a common operational model: hijack a ship and take hostages, then extort a ransom for the safe return of both.

Pirates have discovered that the rewards of hijackings far outweigh the risks of capture and punishment. Piracy offers lucrative work in Somalia, a nation that is short on jobs and money. One estimate put piracy earnings from last year alone at $238 million. According to a report by Al-Jazeera, a number of locals have abandoned traditional occupations such as fishing for the far more lucrative pursuit of piracy. With a successful hijacking yielding an average ransom of $5 million—and as much as $9.5 million—the financial attractiveness of piracy is clear. The allure is only increasing, in part because pirates have successfully exploited the willingness of many shipping companies to pay a negotiated ransom for the release of valuable ships, crews, and cargoes. The number of hostages captured by pirates increased from 163 in 2007 to 1,065 in 2010. Insurer Munich Re estimates that kidnap and ransom amounts rose tenfold between 2008 and 2009, while another estimate suggests that average ransoms have risen from $150,000 in 2005 to $5.4 million.

Figure 1: The Arabian Sea


Figure 2: Expanded range and frequency of piracy attacks (2006–2010)

Source: International Maritime Bureau.
lion in 2010. In November 2010, a $9.5-million ransom was paid for the South Korean oil tanker *Samho Dream*.

THE THREAT OF PIRACY TO THE GCC

The Gulf of Aden, one of the world’s most highly trafficked waterways, has become one of the most vulnerable areas for pirate attacks. Approximately 20,000 ships pass through the Gulf each year, or roughly 20 percent of global commercial shipping. According to estimates from the U.S. Department of Energy, about 3.3 million barrels of oil—roughly 4 percent of daily global demand—pass through the Gulf each day.

While piracy affects international shipping, the GCC states have become particularly vulnerable as pirate operations have expanded beyond the Gulf of Aden. Roughly 90 percent of GCC oil exports transit in tankers through the waters of the Persian Gulf and into the Arabian Sea via the Strait of Hormuz, constituting nearly 40 percent of the world’s traded oil supply. In addition, nearly 1,800 billion cubic feet of liquefied natural gas also pass through the strait each year en route to markets in Europe and Asia.

Beyond energy exports, GCC economies more broadly depend on maritime trade. According to a Saudi Maritime Company official, nearly 95 percent of Saudi Arabia’s trade travels through pirate-infested waters. In addition to tankers, other ships carrying goods such as grain, iron ore, sugar, and finished goods transit the Strait of Hormuz travelling to and from major ports like Dubai. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), as a global transit hub, in particular has felt the sting of piracy. As of February 4, 2011, pirates held captive nine vessels either owned by UAE companies or originating from UAE ports immediately prior to their hijacking.

Crude oil tankers seem to have become especially vulnerable to pirate attacks. Rising fuel prices have led large tankers to decrease their steaming speed, making them more susceptible to interception by pirates. Because they are seen as high-value targets, crude oil tankers also tend to pay higher ransoms than other merchant vessels. Whereas global shipping companies have the option of avoiding the Gulf of Aden by rerouting, due to their location, GCC states have no other choice. In short, crude oil tankers transiting the Strait of Hormuz and sailing through the Arabian Sea will continue to supply a steady stream of pirate targets.

The danger is not just theoretical. In March 2011, pirates hijacked the Kuwaiti oil tanker *Zirku* off the southeast coast of Oman. In 2008, pirates seized the Saudi supertanker MV *Sirius Star*, which was fully loaded with 2 million barrels of crude oil (more than a quarter of Saudi Arabia’s daily oil production output) worth at least $100 million. In March 2011, HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE minister of foreign affairs, described maritime piracy as “quickly becoming one of the most threatening challenges of the 21st century.”

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSES AND OPTIONS

Since pirate activity in the Gulf of Aden spiked dramatically in 2008, piracy has increasingly captured international attention. Three major military operations currently address piracy in the region: Operation Atalanta, an EU deployment (EU-NAVFOR) originally tasked with protecting UN World Food Program shipments to Somalia; Operation Ocean Shield, a NATO deployment with similar responsibilities; and Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151), a U.S.-led international effort comprising 25 nations and headquartered in Bahrain. In addition, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China, Japan, India, and Iran all conduct independent maritime security operations in the area.

In June 2008, UN Security Council Resolution 1816 authorized international naval vessels to enter Somali territorial waters in pursuit of pirates. The majority of anti-piracy operations consist of visit, board, search, and seizure (VBSS) operations, in which small teams board and search suspected pirate vessels from larger naval ships such as cruisers and destroyers. Overall, the international response has centered on patrols and intervention but has failed to comprehensively address the...
more complex issues of deterrence and punishment.

For their part, international shipping companies have taken two approaches to dealing with the piracy problem in the Gulf of Aden. The first is to avoid the Gulf entirely, by rerouting ships around the Cape of Good Hope. This option adds significant time and expense. A single tanker operating for a year between Saudi Arabia and the United States by way of the Cape of Good Hope would add an additional 2,700 miles to each voyage, see its annual productivity reduced by more than 25 percent, and incur additional annual fuel costs of $3.5 million.31 A report by the U.S.-based One Earth Foundation calculates the additional cost to shippers of rerouting 10 percent of vessels to be around $2.3 to $3 billion a year.32 In addition, with the pirates’ range now reaching up to 1,300 miles off the coast of East Africa, even this substantial rerouting would not fully place ships beyond the range of pirates.

The second approach is to accept the risk of a potential hijacking and ransom demands and to continue shipping operations in the area. To reduce the level of risk for “running the gauntlet,” many shipping companies now implement the shipping industries Best Management Practices (BMP) while operating in the region and install recommended Self-Protection Measures (SPM) to help protect their vessels from pirate attacks.

In addition, a proliferation of private security companies now offer armed escorts to merchant ships across the Gulf of Aden. On April 26, 2011, leading British insurer Jardine Lloyd Thompson announced that it is organizing a fleet of 18 gunboats to shepherd convoys across the Gulf of Aden.33 Aside from raising numerous legal complications, the private security escort solution is also costly. According to Jacob Larsen, security officer at the Baltic and International Maritime Council (BIMCO), a major umbrella shipping trade organization, the cost of armed security for the three-day transit through the Gulf of Aden is $50,000—10 times the daily profit for very large crude carriers (VLCCs).34

**OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR MORE EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES**

While the international community has largely driven the piracy debate, it is the GCC states that have the most to lose if the problem goes unaddressed. Taking the lead on responding to the threat provides both an opportunity for GCC governments to demonstrate leadership and initiative. Some noteworthy steps have been taken. In April 2011, the UAE convened a high-profile international counter-piracy conference focused on long-term on-shore solutions to the piracy problem. The preceding year, the UAE held the chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), a group made up of 33 countries around the Indian Ocean, while Bahrain currently leads Combined Task Force 152 (CTF-152), a multinational effort under the supervision of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, which patrols the Gulf but does not participate directly in counter-piracy operations.

While these efforts are encouraging, progress remains slow. To date, GCC counter-piracy operations mostly have been coordinated via third countries, for example by integrating GCC naval officers into multinational fleets and through low-level Saudi, UAE, and Bahraini participation in CTF-151.35 GCC leaders have often hinted at a more robust GCC involvement in counter-piracy operations. After the seizure of the MV *Sirius Star* in November 2008, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal of Saudi Arabia said his country intended to join international efforts to battle piracy.36 Subsequently, in June 2009, representatives from every GCC state gathered in Riyadh to discuss an all-Arab naval task force for combating piracy, but the talks have failed to result in any concrete action. The UAE in particular has been vocal in calling for an increased GCC role in counter-piracy operations. In April 2010, the commander of the UAE Navy, Staff Brigadier Ibrahim al-Musharakah, called for the security of the Gulf’s waterways to eventually be under the permanent leadership of GCC navies.37
Potential exists for increased GCC leadership, but this goal remains aspirational. At the moment, GCC navies lack a significant ocean-going capability and have relatively limited maritime capacity beyond coastal vessels. Saudi Arabia is currently the only Gulf state with the naval assets to potentially contribute to maritime security operations beyond its own territorial waters. Although GCC states have been enhancing their naval capability—the UAE recently acquired 6 French-built corvettes, along with 24 amphibious assault ships and 70 transport and attack helicopters, while Oman has invested in at least 3 offshore vessels, to be supported by 36 naval helicopters—the objective of such acquisitions is the defense of their own territorial waters mere 12 nautical miles off the coast.

Still, the UAE recently achieved one notable counter-piracy success. On April 2, 2011, UAE Special Forces, backed by air force units and in coordination with the U.S. Fifth Fleet, boarded and retook the Abu Dhabi-owned bulk carrier MV Arrilah-I, which had been hijacked and was under pirate control. The forces secured the safe rescue of the crew and arrested the pirates, who will be charged and prosecuted in the UAE.

Beyond these operational considerations, a more robust individual and collective role for GCC states would have to account for several key factors. For one thing, the GCC’s uneven track record in developing unified strategies, let alone effective, interoperable forces that are able to carry out common missions, is a major challenge to overcome. As Anthony Cordesman writes, “the Southern Gulf states have large military resources but limited real-world effectiveness and have made limited progress towards collective and integrated defense.”

Moreover, the United States continues to guarantee the collective and individual security of GCC states, and so primacy in counter-piracy operations in the Gulf seems unlikely to shift from the United States to the GCC anytime soon. Still, a more active GCC role in counter-piracy operations presents GCC navies with the opportunity to gain operational experience and improve interoperability (both with other GCC states and with the United States) in an environment where the threat is manageable.

Yemen, a non-GCC state, has also taken some independent actions against pirates operating on its coast. The Yemeni Coast Guard created an antipiracy unit comprising 16 high-speed boats and 1,600 Special Forces. While the effort has not eliminated Yemeni-based pirate operations, such initiatives can be a step in the right direction to suppress their growth. However, if current political unrest in Yemen worsens, such modest progress may be lost.

Piracy’s complexity hampers international efforts to reach consensus on how best to deal with the issue. Two major problems exist at the root of this challenge: the scope of operations at sea and the lack of local governance and law enforcement on land. The pirates’ effective operating range now covers more than 1 million square miles of ocean, an impossible area to patrol effectively, according to military officials and policy analysts. The cornerstone of pirates’ freedom of operations remains the safe haven that an ungoverned Somalia provides. Pirates experience no pressure from the local government whatsoever. They remain untouched by any form of local law enforcement. As long as safe havens exist, piracy in the broader Arabian Sea will flourish. As Jason Alderwick, a maritime defense analyst at the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), noted, “Maritime security operations in that area are really only a sticking plaster, they are addressing the symptoms not the causes.”

In addition, inadequate legal frameworks limit the ability of international forces to combat piracy. Specifically, some laws of Western nations restrict preemptive action against suspected pirates. The pirates are aware of these complicated rules of engagement and use them to their advantage.

Perhaps even more legally difficult than intervention is the prosecution of the pirates once detained by na-
val forces. Legal complexities of Western nations and the lack of political will to prosecute has led to the release of between 500 and 700 pirates over the last three years, with some pirates having been arrested multiple times. Often naval forces must ensure that the pirates have enough supplies and fuel to return home—and have even performed engine repairs to pirate vessels.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

Current antipiracy efforts have not been enough to discourage the practice. As of April 14, 2011, the 17 hijackings this year are on pace to equal if not surpass last year’s total of 49 hijacked vessels. In fact, the pirates are becoming more violent. In February 2011, pirates hijacked a sailboat captained by a retired couple from California. The pirates killed all four Americans on board before the U.S. Navy could effectively intervene. The action marked a departure from the modus operandi of most pirates, who prefer to keep hostages alive in order to collect ransom. A U.S. State Department official signaled that the killing of the four Americans was a game changer: “We get it. We need to recalibrate.”

Yet at the same time, piracy in the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea does not constitute a grave and immediate threat to the security interests of the international community or the United States. However, as piracy expands and the success of its activities reaches deeper into the Arabian Sea, piracy will become a greater danger to GCC trade and a more difficult threat to eradicate. It is now clear that, based on the rising number of incidents and improving capabilities of pirates, the activity has become a way of life in the region, not a passing phenomenon.

Addressing the piracy problem will require a coordinated response by a number of international actors. The international community, led by the European Union and United States, must continue multilateral efforts to develop a consolidated and comprehensive legal framework for the detention and prosecution of suspected pirates. While the international community can assist in shaping the legal framework, the states of the region, whose direct interests are threatened and who have the financial capabilities to address the issue, must take the lead in combating piracy. In order to bolster their own counter-piracy capabilities, GCC countries could take a number of concrete steps.

First, in coordination with international actors, GCC governments should seek to transition from a secondary role to a primary role in combating piracy in the coastal waters off the shore of the Arabian Peninsula. A focused effort on managing operations within the Gulf of Aden should be a starting point. The smaller vessels of GCC navies and their current coastal capabilities are more suited to patrolling that narrow waterway rather than the vaster expanses of the Arabian Sea to the west. Moreover, the limited geographic area is a manageable mission to test GCC naval capabilities. In addition, GCC navies could over time manage security of the Internationally Recommended Transit Corridor (IRTC), a section of water that vessels transiting the Gulf of Aden are recommended to sail through for safety.

This is a long-term process, but in the short term GCC navies could work toward these goals by increasing their participation in CTF-151 and by taking on expanded roles in strategy, command, and operations. In conjunction, GCC states should increase their investment in training for VBSS operations and continue expanding their fleets of coastal vessels and auxiliary helicopters. These efforts should be fully coordinated with U.S. and other naval forces to maximize coordination and cooperation. In designing these strategies, GCC states should seriously study other subregional counter-piracy efforts—for instance, the recent initiatives by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which have dramatically reduced piracy in and around the Strait of Malacca.

Second, GCC states should complement enhanced antipiracy naval operations with developing effective law enforcement and legal mechanisms to efficiently prosecute and imprison pirates. This would serve as an increased deterrent to pirates, who are seldom charged and prosecuted due to the lack of suitable legal framework. Such a system might include specially designated courts and prisons for prosecuting and incarcerating pirates and should be developed in cooperation with international legal bodies.

None of this can happen if GCC states do not make counter-piracy operations a higher priority. Currently, counter-piracy is low on the GCC foreign policy agenda, and statements or initiatives to address the issue occur sporadically and only as a response to high-profile hijackings or successful operations by local naval forces. In order to seriously address the problem, GCC states need to match their political commitment to greater investments and resources.

Piracy is a problem that plays out in the GCC’s own backyard and poses an opportunity for GCC governments to...
demonstrate greater individual and collective leadership in regional maritime security. Failure to do so risks a further deterioration in the safety of regional waterways and the maritime trade that GCC countries depend on. Ultimately, counter-piracy represents a chance for the GCC countries to lead. They should not pass up the opportunity.

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NOTES

1. The Arabian Sea is bordered by the Arabian Peninsula on the west and India in the east.


5. Ibid.


12. Ibid.


24. Webb, “Record Oil Prices: Iran and the Strait of Hormuz.”


26. According to the One Earth report, AP Moeller-Maersk has diverted its fleet of 83 tankers, as has the Norwegian Odfjell shipping group with a fleet of 90 tankers, and Frontline, one of the world’s major oil transporting companies. Some trading nations can also bypass the Somali piracy threat relatively easily. For instance, Australian-origin tonnage transiting through the Suez Canal dropped steeply from 25,279,000 tons in 2008 to 3,679,000 in 2010. See Bowden, “The Economic Cost of Maritime Piracy,” 12.

27. Although some pipelines exist that can transport oil to ports on the Red Sea, such as Saudi Arabia’s 745-mile East-West pipeline, which has a capacity of 5 million barrels per day (bpd), these remain underutilized.


34. McCracken, “Piracy: An Escalated Threat to Shipping?”


44. Ibid.


47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.


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