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Turbulent Seas

Understanding Maritime Terrorism off the East African Coastline

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Abstract

The recent large-scale attacks conducted by the Yemeni Houthi rebels on international shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden have exposed the re-emerging threat of maritime terrorism. Along and off the East African coastline, terrorist groups are increasingly expanding their landward activities into the maritime domain, revealing transnational maritime links in the region and beyond. This paper investigates the extent and recent trends of maritime terrorism in East Africa, as well as the drivers of the recent surge. The research finds that maritime terrorism in the region is mainly driven by smuggling and extortion, rather than offensive actions. An assessment of maritime terrorism in East Africa allows for better comprehension of the fragility of its maritime spheres, amidst the growing geostrategic and geo-economic significance of the Western Indian Ocean in international relations and security affairs.

Photo by AFP/Khaled Ziad: The cargo ship MV Rubymar sinks in the Red Sea after being struck by a Houthi anti-ship ballistic missile.

Content

1 Introduction **1**

2 What is maritime terrorism? **2**

2.1 Definitions from the perspectives of international law and academia 2

2.2 Typologies and causes of maritime terrorism 3

2.3 The record of terrorist attacks at sea so far 4

3 Overview of maritime terrorism in East Africa — A rising threat from the Red Sea to the Mozambique Channel **5**

3.1 The Islamic State in Mozambique — The sea as a manoeuvre space 6

3.2 The sea as al-Shabaab's main source of income 8

3.3 The Houthis' increasing collaboration with al-Shabaab: A transactional relationship based on maritime smuggling 10

3.4 The Islamic State-Somalia: Smuggling of weapons and terrorists on the sea 11

4 Drivers of maritime terrorism in East Africa **13**

4.1 Limited capabilities of regional coastguards and navies 14

4.2 Insufficient frameworks for maritime security cooperation between East African coastal states 15

4.3 Geography: The proximity of major Sea Lines of Communication to the East African coastline 15

4.4 Socio-economic factors: Low development, poverty, and unemployment 17

5 Conclusion **18**

List of Tables

Table 1. The benefits of the maritime smuggling of weapons and other goods for criminal and terrorist actors operating off the Horn of Africa coastline ____ 11

Table 2. The extent of maritime strategies used by terrorist groups off the East African coastline ____ 13

Table 3. Comparison of the strength of naval forces and coastguards of East African coastal states (as of 2024) ____ 14

1 Introduction

On 10 May 2025, the Russian oceanographic vessel *Atlantida K-1704* was attacked by insurgents linked to the Islamic State in Mozambique (ISM), off the coast of Mozambique's Northern province of Cabo Delgado.[1] This incident marks the first terrorist attack on a foreign vessel off the Mozambican coast.[2] The attack does not represent an exceptional case of maritime terrorism along the East African coastline. From the Red Sea to the Mozambique Channel, terrorist groups increasingly exploit the maritime domain to conduct attacks, supply goods and personnel for tactical and financial reasons, and strengthen transnational relations with other terrorist groups. The Islamic State in Mozambique, the Somalia-based al-Shabaab, the Islamic State-Somalia (IS-Somalia), and the Yemeni Houthi rebels are the four main terrorist groups that actively engage in maritime activities off the coast of East Africa.

The East African maritime area is already being challenged by threats such as piracy and armed robbery at sea, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, trafficking and smuggling activities, interstate disputes over maritime boundaries, and a growing great-power-competition in the Greater Horn of Africa.[3] Maritime terrorist activities, including those that are not offensive in nature, have a negative impact on the maritime or *blue economies* of respective East African states. East African terrorist groups have developed the ability to extort coastal businesses, which deprives the affected states of precious revenues that they could otherwise have invested in economic development. In terms of offensive capabilities, regional terrorist groups have in the past conducted attacks either from the sea against coastal targets or from the coast against sea targets, causing significant damage to civilians and security forces off and on the East African coastline.

Within the region, the spill-over from classical land-based terrorism to maritime terrorism became prominent in early 2011, when al-Shabaab captured the coastal city of Kismayo in southern Somalia. This dynamic enabled the terrorist group to build up an extensive maritime smuggling network, which has since then become its main source of income.[4] Maritime terrorism in East Africa continued to grow in 2015, when IS-Somalia captured and briefly controlled the coastal city of Qandala in Somalia's semi-autonomous region of Puntland.[5] The phenomenon then spread beyond the Horn of Africa, southwards to Mozambique. In Northern Mozambique, especially in Cabo Delgado, offensives from ISM repeatedly targeted coastal infrastructures and cities, up to the extent of interrupting TotalEnergies' liquefied natural gas (LNG) project worth 20 billion U.S.-dollars.[6]

The present study investigates these and other cases of maritime terrorism in East Africa, including the growing footprint of the Houthis on and off the coast of the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, the study categorises the maritime strategies used by the investigated terrorist groups and considers main drivers of maritime terrorism in East Africa, such as limited capabilities of regional coastguards and naval forces, insufficient

regional cooperation in maritime security, the proximity of major sea trade routes, and socio-economic factors in coastal areas. Using a qualitative methodology, the study draws on academic and policy sources as well as on interviews conducted with East African experts on maritime security. By doing so, the study provides a comprehensive understanding on maritime terrorism in a region of increasing geostrategic and geo-economic significance.

Academic research on maritime security in Sub-Saharan Africa in general remains limited in comparison with other maritime arenas, such as the South China Sea or the Black Sea. In addition, most of that attention concerns piracy and armed robbery at sea off the Somali coast and in the Gulf of Guinea, rather than maritime terrorism and further threats to maritime security.[7] Consequently, the *modus operandi* of terrorist groups engaging the sea off the East African coastline and especially outside Somalia remains poorly investigated.

2 What is maritime terrorism?

According to Christian Bueger and Timothy Edmunds, terrorism and political extremism at sea belong together with interstate maritime disputes and maritime crime (*blue crime*) to the three interconnected dimensions of maritime security as an analytical framework.[8] Maritime terrorism differs from land-based terrorism in terms of the strategic considerations it imposes on violent non-state actors, as the remote and open configuration of the maritime environment forces terrorist groups operating at sea to conceive specific strategies and tactics.[9] For instance, the Houthi rebels have developed offensive tactics that significantly differ from terrorist attacks carried out against land targets, such as missile and drone attacks against ships, the hijacking of ships, and the laying of sea mines.[10] While the acquisition of territorial (land) control remains the main strategic objective of most terrorist groups, they often reveal a high degree of dependency on the maritime environment to reach their strategic objectives. As around 90 per cent of global trade is moved by sea, terrorist groups have high incentives to exploit the maritime environment for logistical and offensive means.[11]

2.1 Definitions from the perspectives of international law and academia

Despites the empirical evidence of maritime terrorism in numerous maritime areas, there are still no globally accepted definitions of this phenomenon from circles of international law and academia. From a perspective of international law, the different elements of maritime terrorism are rather spitted up in numerous international treaties that list unlawful acts at sea, which, however, also include acts of piracy and armed robbery at sea.[12] Up to date, there is no international treaty that provides an

exclusive definition of maritime terrorism. Yet, a group of legal scholars argues that among international legal frameworks, only the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (also known as SUA Convention) is applicable to cases of maritime terrorism.[13] The SUA Convention, adopted in 1988 by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and applicable to all maritime areas from territorial waters to the high seas, identified the following actions as intentional unlawful acts on sea:

a) seizure of a ship by force or intimidation;

b) physical violence against persons on board a ship if the violence threatens the safety of navigation of the ship;

c) damage or destruction of a ship or its cargo as well as its navigational facilities;

d) communication of false information that endangers the safe navigation of a ship.[14]

Due to the rise of maritime terrorist attacks in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001, the IMO adopted in 2005 a protocol of the SUA Convention of 1989 that extends the list of unlawful acts on sea. Most notably, the 2005 SUA Protocol identified the use of a ship as a weapon and the use of explosive, radioactive material as well as biological, chemical and nuclear (BNC) weapons against a ship as further unlawful acts on sea.[15] In addition to the above-mentioned definitions from international law, some academics tried to deliver a comprehensive definition of maritime terrorism that draws a distinction from piracy and armed robbery at sea. Patricia Schneider, for instance, defines maritime terrorism as "[...] the threat or use of violence [...] aimed at enforcing political and/or social change on the political-ideological interests of the terrorists, by means of psychological stress", carried out in a "maritime area".[16]

2.2 Typologies and causes of maritime terrorism

According to Meghan Curran, terrorist groups exploit the sea with defensive and offensive means through five strategies, of which two are operationally motivated and three are driven by financial factors. On an operational level, violent non-state actors use the sea to 1) provide "tactical support" to move goods or personnel and conduct raids by sea on land targets, and to 2) deliberately "target" maritime assets, such as ships, offshore energy infrastructure, ports, and other critical maritime infrastructure.[17] On a financial level, violent non-state actors exploit the sea through three different strategies: 1) to "take" goods or persons at sea by violent and illegal means such as piracy or armed robbery at sea, 2) to "traffic and trade" goods and services at sea to fund land-based operations, and 3) to "tax and extort" specific maritime businesses such as ports.[18]

Terrorist attacks in the maritime domain can furthermore be categorised in four target types, as conceptualised by Martin N. Murphy: 1) "iconic targets" such as naval vessels and cruise ships linked to certain states, 2) "economic targets" such as critical maritime energy infrastructure (pipelines and offshore oil rigs, for example) and tankers, 3) "mass-casualty targets" such as cruise ships and ferries, and finally 4) the use of "ships as weapons", for example by sailing it to a port and blow it up there.[19]

According to the political and military context of their land-centred insurgency, terrorist groups use specific maritime strategies and attack certain maritime targets. However, most terrorist groups use the sea for non-offensive means, to move supplies or insurgents.[20] As Martin N. Murphy notes,

terrorists usually need a combination of the following factors to deliberately exploit the sea: 1) "legal and jurisdictional opportunities", 2) "geographical necessity", 3) "inadequate security", 4) "secure base areas", 5) "maritime tradition", 6) "charismatic and effective leadership", 7) "state support", and 8) "promise of reward".[21]

In general, the emergence of maritime terrorism often results from a lack of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) or *sea blindness* within state structures. MDA describes the process of developing a comprehensive situational picture of a specific maritime area to facilitate knowledge and understanding of maritime threats and, on this basis, to put forward proposals for more efficient maritime security operations (MSO) conducted by coastguards or naval forces.[22] Given the fact that most efforts to counter terrorist groups have been centred on land-based operations, several states have so far neglected maritime counterterrorism efforts, therefore providing an alternative space for terrorist smuggling, manoeuvres, and even attacks.[23]

2.3 The record of terrorist attacks at sea so far

The first incident of maritime terrorism recognised as such was the hijacking in 1961 of the cruise ship *Santa Maria* while sailing from Curaçao to Miami.[24] From this incident on, the largest terrorist attacks at sea have been in large part carried out by five groups of violent non-state actors: 1) Levantine terrorist groups, especially the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF), 2) the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from Sri Lanka, 3) al-Qaeda and affiliates, 4) the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) from the Philippines, and 5) the Yemeni Houthi rebels.[25]

One of the most significant cases was the attack on the Italian ocean liner *MS Achille Lauro* in 1985 by a faction of the PLF. The terrorists boarded the ship with its several hundred crew members and its remaining 97 passengers (most of the passengers had left the ship for an expedition ashore) while it was docked at the port of Alexandria, Egypt.[26] The next major incidents of maritime terrorism have mainly occurred in the Indian Ocean. Off Sri Lanka's northeastern coast, the LTTE and their more than 2,000 members managed to constrain the freedom of navigation of the Sri Lankan Navy by repeatedly attacking its vessels, particularly in the second half of the 1990s.[27] Maritime terrorism increased again in the first half of the 2000s due to growing activity of al-Qaeda affiliates in the Middle East. In October 2000, a group affiliated to al-Qaeda attacked the US guided missile destroyer *USS Cole* in the Yemeni port of Aden by exploding a small boat next of it. This first major terrorist attack conducted against the US Navy severely damaged the *USS Cole* and killed 17 American sailors.[28] In October 2002, the same al-Qaeda affiliate attacked the French-flagged oil tanker *MV Limburg* off the coast of Yemen, provoking the death of a crew member as well as a significant oil spill in the Gulf of Aden.[29]

The next major maritime terrorist attacks resulted again as temporary maritime spillovers of land-based Islamist terrorism. Only two years after the attack on the *MV Limburg*, the Philippine Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) sunk the ferry *MV SuperFerry 14* in Manila Bay through a bomb hidden in a television set inside the ferry.[30] The tragedy resulted in the death of 166 passengers and crew members and highlighted the threat of maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia.[31]

While these incidents of maritime terrorism had only a limited impact on maritime trade, the escalation of maritime terrorism carried out between November 2023 and July 2025 by the Houthi rebels lead to the collapse of ships transits in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. During this period, the Houthis have targeted more than 100 merchant ships as well as some few navy vessels in the Red Sea, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden.[32] This historically unprecedented escalation of maritime terrorism caused a decrease of at least 70 per cent of the tonnage of ships entering the Gulf of Aden between December 2023 and February 2024.[33] As a result, merchant vessels transiting between Europe and Asia were redirected from the Suez Canal to South Africa's Cape of Good Hope, which significantly drove up transport costs and caused delays.[34] International shipping through the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait only rose again from November 2025 despite remaining 50 per cent lower than the period prior to the Houthi attacks.[35]

Although their offensive capabilities have significantly been diminished by previous U.S. and Israeli air strikes conducted between 2023 and 2025, the Houthis retain enough weapons, such as missiles and unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), to resume attacks on international shipping.[36] With the 2026 escalation of the war in Iran, the possibility of renewed Houthi maritime terrorism cannot be excluded as Tehran remains the main ally and arms supplier of the Yemeni rebel group. In addition, the Houthis declared in early June that they would prevent ships linked to Israel from entering the Red Sea after Israel renewed its airstrikes against Iran.[37] As the Strait of Hormuz remains closed by the Iranian armed forces, a resurgence of Houthi attacks against international shipping in the Red Sea Security Arena would significantly harm the global economy as well as the economies of East African states.

3 Overview of maritime terrorism in East Africa — A rising threat from the Red Sea to the Mozambique Channel

Along and off the East African coastline, the Islamic State in Mozambique, al-Shabaab, the Houthi rebels, and the Islamic State-Somalia are engaged in different maritime activities. Some groups focus on operational activities, while others prefer to extend their maritime smuggling routes to generate income. All four mentioned terrorist groups, however, reveal a crime-terrorism-nexus, since they exploit the same vulnerabilities and use similar tactics than criminal actors.

3.1 The Islamic State in Mozambique — The sea as a manoeuvre space

The Islamic State in Mozambique exploits the maritime area off the coast of Cabo Delgado in northeastern Mozambique to transport combatants and support operations onshore with sea-based attacks. The insurgency of ISM escalated in March 2020, when militants attacked Mocímboa da Praia. Simultaneously attacking from land and sea, the terrorists achieved to occupy the coastal city for a day before fleeing with two stolen patrol vessels of the Mozambican Navy.[38] This incident marked the first significant maritime attack of ISM as well as the beginning of the use of deliberate maritime strategies and tactics by the group. A short time later, in April 2020, ISM launched a strategy of island warfare by targeting several islands off the coast of Cabo Delgado to control maritime infrastructure for operational support of land-based activities and improved access to transnational illicit maritime trade routes.[39]

Since October 2017, the Islamic State in Mozambique is engaged in an armed insurgency against the state of Mozambique in its northeastern province of Cabo Delgado. The jihadists, who call themselves *Ansar al-Sunna* ("followers of the Prophet Muhammad's teachings"), carry out frequent terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets with the aim of establishing a political order based on Islamic law (*sharia*).[40] To date, the conflict has caused the death of more than 6,500 individuals[41] and displaced over 1.1 million people, approximatively half of the province's population.[42] The three major actors involved in fighting ISM, the Mozambican Armed Defence Forces (FADM), the Rwanda Defence Force (RDF), and the Tanzania People's Defence Force (TPDF), have failed to decisively defeat the terrorist group.[43] While there is a lack of consensus among researchers regarding the real causes of the insurgency, most of them identify three main drivers of the conflict: 1) poor social and economic conditions of the local population, 2) influence of radical foreign and local preachers, and 3) internal conflicts between moderate Sufi Muslims and radical Wahhabi Muslims.[44]

In August 2020, elements of ISM returned to Mocímboa da Praia and occupied the port city until August 2021.[45] As a result, the French multinational TotalEnergies was forced to declare in April 2021 the interruption of its offshore LNG project close to the coastal city of Palma, since the terrorist occupation of Mocímboa da Praia hindered cargo deliveries to the LNG extraction sites.[46] The Islamic insurgency in Cabo Delgado reached its peak in March 2021, when around 300 fighters attacked the coastal city of Palma, the city with the largest population of the province, targeting public buildings, businesses, and civilians, of whom almost 1,200 may have been killed.[47]

ISM launched a significant maritime attack in May 2025, when its fighters attacked the Russian oceanographic vessel *Atlantida K-1704* off the coast of Cabo Delgado. While the vessel was conducting oceanographic and fishing research, ISM-insurgents opened fire against the vessel, aiming at hijacking it.[48] As this incident marks the first attack conducted by ISM against a foreign ship, it highlights that the terrorist group possesses the capability and will to threaten international shipping in the Mozambique Channel. By attacking a foreign-flagged ship, ISM selected an iconic target, likely aiming at preventing the entrance of foreign ships to the waters of Cabo Delgado. Such a sovereigntist motive is probable since ISM justified its insurgency in Cabo Delgado partially

because of the presence of foreign companies there. The terrorist group has developed a narrative in which it describes foreign companies participating in Cabo Delgado's offshore LNG projects as "Crusader oil companies" that would undermine the interests of the local Muslim population by depriving it of sovereign access to natural resources.[49]

The porous geography of Cabo Delgado's coastline and its nearby islands can be considered an additional factor that explain why ISM use the sea to conduct attacks and operate supply chains. Cabo Delgado's coastline is a fractured environment consisting of numerous mangroves, peninsulas, estuaries, and nearby dispersed islands. These geographic features enable ISM to move boats undetected along the coastline and from the coastline to islands using small landing points and informal trade routes that lead to southern Tanzania.[50] The geographic proximity of Mocímboa da Praia, as a main target of ISM in the past, to several islands — such as Ilha Metundo that is around 37 kilometres away of the coastal city — allows ISM to quickly retreat to its island basements after having launched coastal attacks.[51] In addition, rivers leading to the sea offer ISM the possibility to hide hijacked ships and stolen goods, as well as to conduct attacks in the hinterland. For instance, ISM controls the Messalo river, which allows the group to conduct marine operations between one of its basements in the hinterland and the sea. The river mouth consists of mangroves, preventing the Mozambican Navy to successfully enter the river.[52]

In addition to carrying out maritime attacks, ISM also operates some smuggling networks on sea. The most eminent one is the illicit trade in timber, which is smuggled from Cabo Delgado to ports in China, where it is required for the manufacture of popular luxury furniture.[53] For ISM, the maritime smuggling of timber serves as one of its key sources of income, generating revenues of approximately 1.9 million U.S.-dollars per month.[54] Some reports note that firms pay a protection fee of ten per cent to ISM to carry out illegal logging in Cabo Delgado's forests.[55] However, unlike al-Shabaab in Somalia that collects taxes from the maritime export of charcoal *(see the following subchapter)*, ISM has not achieved yet tax collection capabilities from maritime businesses, including those that export timber through Cabo Delgado's ports, as the latter remain under the firm control of the Mozambican state.[56] Within the maritime environment, ISM only achieves to extort money from fishermen through hijacking their boats and crews on the coast.[57]

In addition, two maritime developments have the potential to increase the popularity of ISM within the local coastal population: the relaunch of TotalEnergies' offshore LGN project and the frequent killing of fishermen by the Mozambican Navy. Last January, TotalEnergies and Daniel Chapo, the President of Mozambique, announced that construction works of the LNG infrastructure would resume after they had been interrupted in 2021 due to nearby terrorist activities.[58] However, a significant share of Cabo Delgado's population does not believe in the economic potential of the LNG project but rather fears that the generated revenues will mainly benefit government officials instead of themselves.[59] ISM terrorists could therefore exploit the local population's frustration for their recruitment propaganda and initiate attacks against offshore LNG infrastructure.

The other recent development that may increase the popularity of ISM within the local population is the repeated killing of Cabo Delgado's fishermen by the Mozambican Navy, which suspects them to

collaborate with the insurgents.[60] According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), coastal operations of the Mozambican Navy resulted in the killing of 85 fishermen between 2023 and last March.[61] This escalation of violence has the potential to draw local young men to ISM that are affected and frustrated by personal and economic consequences of the extrajudicial killings.

3.2 The sea as al-Shabaab's main source of income

Despite the land-based insurgency of *Harakat Al-Shabaab Al-Mujaahidiin*, also known as "al-Shabaab" ("The Youth"), the terrorist group has been expanding its maritime activities to support operations on the ground for the past 15 years. Al-Shabaab moves fighters and weapons off Somalia's coast, extorts from maritime businesses, and operates large smuggling networks across the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.[62] Apart from blue crime, al-Shabaab imposes taxation on most economic activities in Somalia and all products transiting through areas under its control.[63] According to a report of the UN Security Council (UNSC) Panel of Experts on Somalia, al-Shabaab's total financial income for 2023 exceeded 150 million U.S.-dollars.[64]

al-Shabaab is waging an armed insurgency against the Mogadishu-based Federal Government of Somalia (FGS) for nearly two decades. The terrorist group seeks to "[...] destroy the [...] FGS, rid their country of foreign forces, and establish a 'Greater Somalia', joining all ethnic Somalis across East Africa under strict Islamic rule."[65] As highlighted in a report published in September 2024 by the UN Panel of Experts on Somalia, al-Shabaab [...] "continues to pose the most significant threat to peace and security in Somalia."[66] As of November 2025, al-Shabaab controlled almost 30 per cent of Somali territory, mostly in its central and southern regions.[67] According to recent estimates, al-Shabaab has between 7,000 and 12,000 fighters, although the organisation's true strength remains unknown.[68]

Unlike the Houthis, al-Shabaab has to date not signalled any intention or capability to launch itself significant sea-based attacks against ships since it undertook a strategic shift from offensive maritime activities to the taxation of maritime businesses and maritime smuggling.[69] The group, however, regularly carries out gun and suicide bombing attacks on coastal places, such as beaches or seaports. In August 2024, for instance, al-Shabaab conducted a particularly large-scale attack on a beach in Mogadishu, leading to the death of at least 32 civilians.[70] The group is also capable of conducting symbolic attacks against maritime-linked targets. In February 2019, al-Shabaab assassinated the Maltese manager of Bossaso's port in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland, claiming that his links to the Emirati company DP World would undermine Somalia's sovereignty over its maritime sector.[71] Furthermore, al-Shabaab actively cooperates with Somali pirates, as this subchapter will discuss later.

The maritime pivot of al-Shabaab's insurgency began to emerge in 2011, resulting from a crime-terrorism-nexus. In this year that marked the peak of al-Shabaab's power in Somalia, the group gained temporarily control over the ports of Kismayo and Mogadishu, allowing a consolidation and extension of its maritime smuggling activities.[72] Al-Shabaab smuggles mainly charcoal, sugar, and weapons on the sea but is also involved in the maritime smuggling of drugs and humans.[73]

In November 2012, al-Shabaab initiated a systematic smuggling of charcoal from Somali ports, mainly Kismayo and Barawa, to the Arabian Peninsula, where forests are rare and the consumption of shisha tobacco is high. Furthermore, most of the charcoal smuggled originates from forests that are under control of al-Shabaab.[74] It is estimated that the maritime smuggling of charcoal reached a market value of 360 million to 384 million U.S.-dollars between 2012 and 2013, with profits divided between al-Shabaab and further entities participating in the supply chain.[75] Despite a UNSC ban on trade with Somali charcoal in force since 2012, charcoal currently remains one of the smuggled goods that provides al-Shabaab the highest revenues, reaching seven million to ten million U.S.-dollars per year.[76]

Al-Shabaab's smuggling of charcoal is closely linked to its smuggling of sugar. Vessels smuggle Brazilian sugar into Somali ports controlled by al-Shabaab, mainly through the port of Kismayo, and load afterwards charcoal to transport it to ports in the Arabian Peninsula.[77] The sugar is then smuggled by al-Shabaab insurgents in trucks to Kenya, generating toll revenues of approximatively 12 million to 18 million U.S.-dollars per year for the group.[78]

The third main maritime smuggling activity conducted by al-Shabaab involves the trade in weapons with criminal and terrorist entities from Yemen. As of 2021, al-Shabaab spent annually around 24 million U.S.-dollars in arms expenditures. In 2021, the total annual expenditure of the group reached 100 million U.S.-dollars, meaning that the purchase of arms represented almost a fifth of its total expenditures.[79] Weapons are usually smuggled across the Gulf of Aden between the coastlines of Yemen and Puntland in northern Somalia, often in stateless dhows as well as in fishing vessels.[80] Given its large and mostly unregulated market for weapons, Yemen is a regional hub for illicit weapons smuggling, both land-based and maritime. This arms trade is also driven by Iran's support for the Houthis and by easily navigable maritime routes connecting Iran and the Arabian Peninsula to the eastern coast of Africa.[81] The weapons trade between Yemen and Somalia increased since the capture of Yemen's capital Sana'a by the Houthi rebels in September 2014, leading since then to a growing transactional collaboration between the Yemeni group and al-Shabaab *(see the following subchapter for more details)*.[82] The Houthis make significant margins in selling weapons such as AK-47s, sniper rifles, rocket-propelled grenades (RPG), man portable mortars, and night vision devices to al-Shabaab.[83]

In addition to the maritime smuggling of goods, al-Shabaab's increasingly collaborates with Somali pirates, therefore contributing to the ongoing resurgence of Somali piracy. In April and May of this year, Somali pirates targeted several dhows and merchant vessels[84], while they had carried out 16 attacks between 2015 and 2022 only.[85] Although it is unlikely that this resurgence of attacks reaches the peak of Somali piracy of the period between 2008 and 2012,[86] it poses an additional challenge to maritime security in the region. While renewed Somali piracy also results from the persistent maritime threat coming from the Houthis — which forces international naval forces to overstretch their areas of operation, consequently leaving several merchant vessels without protection — this development is in fact largely driven by al-Shabaab.

According to a Kenyan expert in maritime security, interviewed in the context of this study, pirates are docking with captured

merchant vessels at Somali ports and natural harbours that are under the full or partial control of al-Shabaab.[87] There, the pirates can hold their stolen ships in a safe location that is protected by al-Shabaab fighters from raids of the Somali National Army and the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM). In exchange for protection, al-Shabaab receives an average 30-per-cent-share of the ransoms collected by the pirates from the shipping company.[88] In addition, al-Shabaab orders some gangs of Somali pirates to conduct attacks against merchant ships, aiming at distracting international naval forces from its own maritime smuggling activities as well as maintaining good relations with the Houthis, who ultimately benefit from maritime insecurity. As al-Shabaab's fighters are specialised in land-based terrorism, they have limited capability to navigate on the sea.[89]

In sum, the main threat posed by al-Shabaab on maritime security in the Horn of Africa does not derive from direct attacks against coastal or sea targets, but rather from its network of illicit maritime trade routes, its taxation of maritime businesses, and its growing collaboration with Somali pirates. al-Shabaab sends the generated revenue of these activities to its terrorist cells across Somalia and East Africa, using the Hawala system, a traditional money transfer system used in the Horn of Africa, among other regions. As the Hawala system functions without physical currency movement, its financial transactions are almost impossible to detect.[90] The generated income is used by al-Shabaab to purchase weapons, which are used to launch attacks on the ground. Amidst the challenges of sovereignty and territorial control of the Federal Republic of Somalia, the growing lack of interest among international actors in funding the AUSSOM, the limited naval cooperation between East African coastal states, and the increasing footprint of the Houthis in the Horn of Africa, al-Shabaab is likely to keep extending its maritime activities.

3.3 The Houthis' increasing collaboration with al-Shabaab: A transactional relationship based on maritime smuggling

In exchange for securing the maritime smuggling route of Iranian-made weapons going to Yemen and escalating piracy off Somalia's coasts, al-Shabaab has reportedly received weapons, attack drones, as well as military and ideological training from the Houthis.[91] The military training provided by the Houthis to al-Shabaab consisted in assembling improvised explosive devices (IED) and operating attack drones, since al-Shabaab currently uses surveillance drones only and therefore seeks to diversify its drone-based activities.[92] Members of al-Shabaab held at least two meetings in Somalia with Houthi representatives in July and September 2025 to discuss the above-mentioned arrangement.[93] According to official sources contacted by the UNSC Panel of Experts on Yemen, al-Shabaab has operational cells in Yemen that are tasked with the purchase of weapons from Houthi-affiliated actors and their subsequent maritime smuggling into Somalia.[94]

The growing maritime smuggling between the Houthis and al-Shabaab directly benefits al-Shabaab's insurgency in Somalia and the Houthis' maritime combat capabilities. For instance, the Somali terrorist group used weapons, which had been previously delivered by the Houthis, to launch attacks against AUSSOM camps in the Somali region of Lower Shabelle in September

and November 2024.[95] With regard to the Houthis, the securing of their maritime supply chains by al-Shabaab allows them to keep receiving Iranian ballistic and cruise missile components as well as anti-ship cruise missiles — among other weapons — that have been used in attacks against merchant vessels.[96] Both groups consider their developing relationship as a win-win-situation, which has the potential to significantly contribute to the achievement of their respective overall strategic goals. As noted in a report of the UNSC, the Houthis and al-Shabaab pursue a rather transactional and opportunistic relationship, instead of an ideological one.[97]

From an ideological point of view, the increasing ties between both terrorist groups might seem surprising. The Houthis are a Zaydi Shiite movement, whereas al-Shabaab is a Sunni group.[98] In addition, the al-Shabaab-affiliate al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has been the target of Houthi ground offensives carried out from 2021 to 2022.[99] Yet, AQAP and the Houthis reached a pragmatic alliance in early 2023 that enabled security and intelligence cooperation between both groups. Consequently, AQAP provided the Houthis with access to al-Shabaab. Together with Somali pirates, Iran, Hezbollah, and Yemen-based smugglers, the three terrorist groups are steadily becoming embedded in a broader network of actors who are deepening their mutual relations for transactional and combat benefits (*see figure 1*).[100] What these criminal and terrorist actors all have in common is the fact that they benefit from the enhanced regional instability caused by their collaboration. In addition, the maritime smuggling of weapons and other goods is at the core of their relationship.

Table 1. The benefits of the maritime smuggling of weapons and other goods for criminal and terrorist actors operating off the Horn of Africa coastline

Actors	Main interests
Houthis	Securing supply chains of Iranian weapons and maritime attacks
al-Shabaab	Access to advanced weapons and training delivered by the Houthis
Somali pirates	Access to weapons and safety of ports assured by al-Shabaab
AQAP	Acquisition of UAVs and weapons from the Houthis
Iran	Securing weapons smuggling to the Houthis and political leverage
Hezbollah	Strengthening influence in Yemen and harming Western powers
Yemen-based smugglers	Revenue from the maritime smuggling of humans, drugs, and weapons

Source: Own illustration.

3.4 The Islamic State-Somalia: Smuggling of weapons and terrorists on the sea

Since its creation in 2015, IS-Somalia had tried to gain access to ports on Puntland's coast to smuggle weapons, fighters, and support goods across the Gulf of Aden. IS-Somalia reached the peak of its maritime terrorism between October and November 2016, when it briefly occupied the port of Qandala.[101]

Through its alliance with its affiliated group in Yemen, the Islamic State in Yemen (IS-Yemen), IS-Somalia was able to develop a network of maritime weapon smuggling, supplies and fighters since then.[102] By 2017, approximatively 200 IS-terrorists from Iraq, Syria, and Yemen entered Somalia by boat to join their affiliate in northern Somalia.[103]

The Islamic State-Somalia was made an official 'province' (*wilaya*) of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2017.[104] Despite its constant loss of territorial control resulting from grounds offensives carried out by Puntland security forces and air strikes launched mostly by the U.S. but also by the United Arab Emirates, IS-Somalia retains strongholds in Puntland's Cal Miskaad mountain range in northern Somalia.[105] As the group entails between 200 and 300 fighters only, however, it poses a less imminent threat to the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Somalia than al-Shabaab and its 7,000 to 12,000 fighters.[106] Nevertheless, the real threat emanating from IS-Somalia lies rather in its function as one of the Islamic State's main hubs for global financial transactions, recruitment, and planning of attacks.[107]

From a maritime perspective, IS-Somalia does not have the same extortion capabilities in Somali ports like al-Shabaab. As the last report of the UNSC on IS-Somalia points out, the terrorist group is currently no longer capable of collecting revenue from the ports of Bosaso, Qandala and Bacaad, due to the security improvements by Puntland security forces.[108] Three years ago however, IS-Somalia would still have been generating about 100,000 U.S.-dollars per month through the extortion and illicit taxation of shipping companies.[109]

Despite the fact that IS-Somalia is no longer capable of extorting maritime businesses in Puntland's main ports, the terrorist group still participates in smuggling activities off Puntland's coast and retains the capability to use the sea for supplies and tactical operations. As noted in a November 2025 report of the UNSC, an important share of IS-Somalia's foreign fighters still enters Somalia by boat. Most of these fighters come from Ethiopia, Kenya, Morocco, Tanzania and Yemen, and illegally land on Somaliland's coast before heading via land routes to Cal Miskaad in Puntland.[110]

Like al-Shabaab, IS-Somalia is involved in maritime smuggling of various goods with criminal and terrorist groups in Yemen. Weapons are the most smuggled items between Yemen and Somalia that threaten most regional stability. Somali arms dealers linked to IS-Somalia smuggle weapons, such as AK-47 assault rifles, PK machine guns (PKM), and RPG ammunition rounds, out of Yemen on a dhow, where they are frequently concealed under ice and fish.[111] Once the dhow docks at a port on Puntland's coast, the weapons are usually concealed in white sugar and rice sacks. In a third step, they are transported at night to Cal Miskaad mountains, where they are delivered to IS-Somalia fighters.[112] To date, the most active arms dealer involved in this maritime smuggling network is an individual named Adbirahman Mohamed Omar who enabled transactions worth more than two million U.S.-dollars between 2017 and 2021 through shipments to Puntland's port of Bacaad in Bari region.[113] The latest known and significant smuggling incident occurred in February 2025, when a boat carrying military uniforms for IS-Somalia was seized by Puntland security forces off the coast of Bari region.[114]

As in the case of al-Shabaab, the maritime smuggling of weapons from Yemen to IS-Somalia directly benefits the offensive insurgency capabilities of the IS-Somalia.

Through its connections in Yemen, IS-Somalia gets access to advanced weaponry, which it could not as easily obtain from another place. IS-Somalia deploys UAVs smuggled from Yemen for reconnaissance and offensive deployments in Cal Miskaad that allow the group to keep some offensive momentum despite its constant territorial losses. In late January of last year, for instance, the group conducted drone strikes against Puntland security forces for the first time, killing two soldiers and injuring others.[115] While these attacks do not indicate a turning point in favour of IS-Somalia's insurgency, they highlight the persistent significance of maritime weapons smuggling in the group's ability to conduct offensive operations and improve its warfare capabilities.

Table 2. The extent of maritime strategies used by terrorist groups off the East African coastline

	Operational level		**Financial level**		
	Tactical support from the sea for onshore ops.	*Attacks on maritime targets*	*Taking goods & individuals on the sea*	*Trafficking goods on the sea*	*Extortion of maritime businesses*
IS-Mozambique	high	moderate	moderate	moderate	low
al-Shabaab	moderate	low	low	high	high
Houthi rebels	moderate	high	high	high	high
IS-Somalia	low	low	low	moderate	low

Source: Own illustration based on Curran et al. 2020: Violence at Sea: How Terrorists, Insurgents, and Other Extremists Exploit the Maritime Domain. Stable Seas, Aug 2020, in: https://www.stableseas.org/post/violence-at-sea-how-terrorists-insurgents-and-other-extremists-exploit-the-maritime-domain [23 Mar 2026].

4 Drivers of maritime terrorism in East Africa

Along the East African coastline, terrorist groups engage in maritime activities, mainly because of four intertwined factors: 1) limited capabilities of East African coastguards and navies, 2) insufficient maritime security cooperation frameworks between East African coastal states, 3) the geographic proximity of major Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs), and 4) socio-economic factors such as low development, poverty, and unemployment in certain coastal regions.

4.1 Limited capabilities of regional coastguards and navies

As illustrated in *table 3*, East African coastal states have naval forces and coastguards with limited capabilities in terms of ships and personnel. Since these states prioritise land-based defence over maritime security, they don't consider the latter as a priority in their security and defence strategies.[116] Therefore, the coastal states of East Africa, and in general most African coastal states, invest significantly more resources in their armies and air forces than in their naval forces.[117] Hence, East African coastal states only maintain brown water navies, which are designed for deployment in flat, muddy and offshore waters. Yet, they don't have at their disposal green water and blue water navies that would be more efficient in countering maritime terrorism and especially smuggling activities, as they can operate far off the coast.[118]

Unter these conditions, the three East African naval forces with the greatest strength in terms of personnel — the Eritrean, Kenyan, and Sudanese naval forces — entail together 4,300 soldiers only[119], while the Nigerian Navy as the strongest one in Sub-Saharan Africa has 25,000 soldiers.[120] And Somalia, whose coastline is the largest in mainland Africa with a total length of 3,333 kilometre[121], does not display a truly functioning navy and has at its disposal a very limited countrywide coastguard.[122] Despite some recent material improvements, naval forces and coastguards of East African coastal states suffer from sea blindness, as they lack sufficient material and human capabilities. Therefore, they are unable to provide the necessary sea power for efficient counter-terrorist measures on the sea.[123]

Table 3. Comparison of the strength of naval forces and coastguards of East African coastal states (as of 2024)

Country	Naval forces		Coastguards	
	Number of personnel	Number of naval ships	Number of personnel	Number of patrol ships
Djibouti	200	17	150	11
Eritrea	1,400	32	N/A	N/A
Kenya	1,600	11	N/A	1
Mozambique	200	28	N/A	N/A
Somalia	Hundreds of naval personnel	N/A	1,000 *(Puntland Maritime Police Force)*	6-11
Somaliland	N/A	N/A	w600	N/A
Sudan	1,300	21	N/A	N/A
Tanzania	1,000	15	100 *(Maritime unit of Gendarmerie)*	N/A

Source: Own illustration based on IISS 2024; Garowe Online 2025: Somali President Hassan Sheikh appoints new Naval commander, 3 Apr 2025, in: https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/somalia/somali-president-hassan-sheikh-appoints-new-naval-commander [25 May 2026]; Levy 2025; Halbeeg News 2024: Somali coast guard receive four high-speed patrol boats from Turkey, 1 Nov 2024, in: https://en.halbeeg.com/somali-coast-guard-receive-four-high-speed-patrol-boats-from-turkey/ [25 May 2026].

4.2 Insufficient frameworks for maritime security cooperation between East African coastal states

Maritime terrorism in East Africa is also driven by the lack of a regional maritime security arrangement.[124] While some regional institutions and frameworks address maritime security, they neither focus on maritime terrorism nor are they consistently implemented by policymakers.[125] Despite facing common maritime threats, East African naval forces don't conduct joint patrols or permanent maritime security operations within a truly intra-African cooperation framework.[126]

Instead, East African states prefer to delegate the defence of their maritime areas to external naval forces. The involvement of foreign navies is especially prominent in the Red Sea Security Arena and off the Somali coast, where external actors, such as the EU, China, France, India, Japan, Turkey, and the US, conduct MSOs. At the same time, this naval assistance significantly contributes to counter maritime threats. For instance, the high concentration of foreign naval vessels in the Red Sea Security Arena prevents terrorist groups from smuggling goods through the Port of Djibouti.[127]

Nevertheless, the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCoC), in particular, serves as an example of a solid framework that has the potential to enhance the maritime security cooperation between East African coastal states, if consistently implemented. The DCoC was adopted under the auspices of IMO in 2009 to contribute to the repression of piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden.[128] All East African coastal states as well as surrounding states in the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, South Africa, and the Island countries of the Western Indian Ocean are signatory states.[129] In 2017, the signatory states adopted the "Jeddah Amendment to the Djibouti Code of Conduct 2017". Participating states agreed to extend their maritime security cooperation to include further maritime threats, such as transnational organized crime (TOC), maritime terrorism, and IUU fishing.[130]

4.3 Geography: The proximity of major Sea Lines of Communication to the East African coastline

Most global cases of maritime terrorism can be attributed to geographical determinants. Terrorist groups rely on the sea for supplies, tactical support of onshore operations, and attacks against sea targets. As highlighted by the case of the Houthi rebels, terrorist groups are particularly prone to exploit the maritime environment when they operate within failed states and in geographic proximity of major SLOCs.

Two major SLOCs pass alongside the East African coastline: the corridor Red Sea-Gulf of Aden and the Mozambique Channel. While the former is currently actively threatened by the Houthi rebels, the latter faces the risk of being attacked by violent non-state actors in the foreseeable future. Since the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden connect two major maritime areas — the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean — they serve as one of the world's most important SLOCs. The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which links the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, belongs together with the Strait of Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca to the world's most critical maritime chokepoints in terms of geo-economic relevance. The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (and the Suez Canal) enable the crossing of ten per

cent of global seaborne trade by volume and 22 per cent of containerized trade flows.[131] East African countries heavily rely on both maritime chokepoints for their foreign trade. For instance, around 31 per cent of Djibouti's trade volume is channelled from the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait to the Suez Canal, while this share is 15 per cent for Kenya and ten per cent for Tanzania.[132]

Because of the geo-economic relevance of the SLOC Red Sea-Gulf of Aden and especially its importance for the foreign trade of Western countries, the Houthi rebels decided to disrupt international shipping in both maritime areas *(see subchapter 2.3)*. Although their maritime attacks were also driven by the aim of bolstering the Yemeni nation and deterring the U.S.[133], they resulted in addition from the proximity of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden to the Houthi strongholds in northwestern Yemen. The Houthis control the largest part of Yemen's Red Sea coast, including its largest port, Al-Hudaydah.[134] Therefore, the rebel group used launch sites located either on the Red Sea coast or up to 100 kilometres inland to fire mostly ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones on merchant vessels and on some few Western naval ships.[135] In addition, the Houthis operate around seven naval bases and 30 control posts on the Red Sea coast. This infrastructure allows the Yemeni rebels to better control missile launches and improve the identification of merchant vessels.[136]

As a result of the escalation of Houthi maritime attacks from November 2023 onwards, commercial vessels operating on the trade route between Europe to Asia via the Suez Canal were forced to reroute along the Cape of Good Hope and the Mozambique Channel to avoid the high-risk area in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The Mozambique Channel is a SLOC, which is located between Mozambique in the west, Comoros and Mayotte — a French overseas territory — in the north, and Madagascar in the east. The waterway is of major importance for international sea trade, as it carries around 30 per cent of global tanker traffic and entails significant offshore gas reserves off the coast of Northern Mozambique.[137] Its geo-economic relevance has risen even more in recent years, since it witnessed a surge of up to 74 per cent of maritime traffic in the months following the escalation of the Houthis' maritime terrorism.[138]

In the long term, offshore energy infrastructure and commercial shipping in the Mozambique Channel face the threat of being attacked by the Islamic State in Mozambique and al-Shabaab. Although ISM does currently not have the material capability to launch attacks far off Cabo Delgado's coast[139], it is still willing to exploit the sea for logistics and attacks near the coast of Cabo Delgado and on islands *(see subchapter 3.1)*. Over the last years, the terrorist group has been gradually expanding the reach of its maritime attacks. On 3 June, for instance, elements of ISM clashed with a patrol ship of the Mozambican Navy 50 kilometres off Cabo Delgado's coastal town of Quiterajo.[140] As ISM is not afraid of engaging in combats with the Mozambican naval forces and controls sections of Cabo Delgado's coastline and some of its nearby islands, a future scenario in which the terrorist group hijacks commercial ships in the Mozambique Channel to generate revenues through ransoms can't be excluded. Especially regarding ISM's ongoing strategy of extorting fishermen and further boat operators.

Furthermore, the ongoing resurgence of Somali piracy — which is mainly driven by its growing collaboration with al-Shabaab *(see subchapter 3.2)* — increases the risk of

attacks being carried out by Somali pirates in the Mozambique Channel. In the past, Somali pirates have demonstrated their capability to attack merchant ships in this waterway. In January 2011, for instance, they hijacked a Mozambican-flagged fishing vessel about 370 kilometres southwest of Comoros to avoid the intense activity of international naval forces further north, off the Somali coast.[141] In sum, the ongoing surge of maritime traffic in the Mozambique Channel increases the risk of maritime terrorism and piracy in this strategic SLOC.

4.4 Socio-economic factors: Low development, poverty, and unemployment

In general, socio-economic factors can be considered main causes of terrorism, although experts disagree on the degree of their significance.[142] Along the East African coastline, maritime terrorism and other maritime threats emerge in marginalised regions that face low development, poverty, unemployment, poor governance, and corruption. Deprived populations, having lost confidence in their respective states as the providers of welfare, join violent non-state actors. This finding is not limited to war-torn countries such as Somalia or Mozambique but also applies to politically more stable countries like Kenya or Tanzania. Along the Kenyan coast, for instance, certain populations feel economically marginalised and therefore join criminal and terrorist entities involved in maritime smuggling activities.[143]

In Mozambique and Somalia, the link between poverty and maritime terrorism is particularly evident. As Paulo Conceição João Faria points out, the Mozambican Government failed so far to address poverty, corruption, unemployment, and poor education in Cabo Delgado.[144] Despite an abundance of natural resources, the province remains one of the poorest in Mozambique, as the average household in Cabo Delgado earns less than one U.S.-dollar per day.[145] Consequently, the Islamic State in Mozambique manages to recruit young men from within this impoverished population who have long since given up hope of a state-led solution to their lack of economic prospects.[146] Somalia faces socio-economic challenges similar to those of Cabo Delgado. In Somalia, the youth unemployment rate reaches almost 34 per cent, the poverty rate 54.4 per cent.[147] Under these circumstances, a considerable number of young Somalis are joining al-Shabaab out of economic necessity, as the average daily wage in Somalia is below two U.S.-dollars, whereas al-Shabaab combatants are paid 100 to 300 U.S.-dollars per month.[148]

5 Conclusion

Terrorist activities across maritime areas off the East African coastline do not merely follow offensive logics but consist mainly of transnational criminal activities, mainly aiming at generating income that is used to fund operations onshore. Except for the Houthi rebels, terrorist groups operating on or off the East African coastline rarely engage in direct attacks against sea targets. In addition, not all four investigated terrorist groups display the same degree of threat. Because of their mutual maritime smuggling activities and their warfare capabilities, the Houthis and al-Shabaab pose a much larger threat to maritime and land-based security than the Islamic State's affiliates in Somalia and Mozambique.

As East African coastal states lack an efficient maritime domain awareness, a functioning naval cooperation at a regional level, face socio-economic challenges, and are located in proximity of major Sea Lines of Communication, terrorist groups are likely to keep exploiting the waters off the East African coastline. Therefore, to prevent terrorist groups from using the sea, East African coastal states should deepen their maritime security cooperation, allocate additional resources for their naval forces and coastguards, and improve the distribution of wealth across their respective coastal regions. In addition, they could integrate national defence forces from surrounding landlocked countries in their maritime counterterrorism strategies. The current deployment of a marine brigade of the Uganda Peoples' Defence Force in Mogadishu highlights the way East African landlocked countries can successfully contribute to maritime counterterrorism efforts in the region.

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