RAAD PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Policy Brief Series
Policy Brief No. 02 | November 2026

ACROSS THE GULF OF ADEN: Somalia, Yemen and the strategic repurposing of a trans-Gulf security assemblage

Dr Mohamed Husein Gaas

Founding Director
RAAD Peace Research Institute

Professor Stig Jarle Hansen

Senior Research Fellow
RAAD Peace Research Institute

Summary

For centuries, Somalia and Yemen have been connected through maritime trade, migration, finance and illicit exchange. What is changing is the strategic function of these long-established networks. Amid protracted conflict, fragmented authority and intensifying competition around the Red Sea, commercial relationships and maritime infrastructure are increasingly being repurposed to facilitate military capacities, expertise, intelligence and operational access across the Gulf of Aden.

This transformation does not depend on a unified alliance. The Houthis, al-Shabaab, pirates, smugglers and financiers retain distinct interests, yet their complementary capabilities can support exchanges without a common command. Established routes, intermediaries and financial systems facilitate exchanges extending beyond weapons to technical knowledge and maritime intelligence, allowing military capabilities to circulate across separate conflicts.

Competition involving Türkiye, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and Israel's engagement with Somaliland further raises the strategic value of the Somali coast. This brief argues that piracy, trafficking and militant contacts are manifestations of a wider transformation: the strategic repurposing of an established trans-Gulf security assemblage. Responses centred on individual shipments or actors will be insufficient unless they address the relationships, knowledge transfers and access arrangements through which these capabilities are built and sustained.

RAAD Peace Research Institute | Mogadishu, Somalia www.rapri.org | contact@rapri.org | X: @PeaceRaad | LinkedIn: RAAD

2. The Issue: An Old, Multidirectional Security Assemblage

International responses to insecurity around the Gulf of Aden remain divided by institutional mandates. Somalia is approached through counter-terrorism, stabilisation, state-building and counter-piracy; Yemen is approached through civil war, Houthi militancy and threats to shipping. Naval forces pursue pirates, sanctions agencies track weapons and financial authorities investigate illicit transactions, while Somalia's political disputes are treated as separate governance problems. These distinctions serve administrative purposes but obscure the connections through which insecurity moves between the shores.

These connections are historically deep and socially embedded. Under British colonial administration, Somalis were encouraged to migrate to Aden, establishing an enduring diaspora in Yemen. Some Somali clans preserve oral histories of 'sister clans' in Yemen and trace lineages to the Arabian Peninsula. Mixed marriages have produced Muwalladeen—people of joint Somali–Yemeni heritage—who can act as brokers and facilitators of cross-Gulf exchange. More recently, Yemeni refugees have become prominent in northern Somali business life, particularly in Somaliland, including through companies such as the Yemeni Company for General Contracting and Al-Zaylai Poultry.

Fishing and resource extraction sustain these everyday relationships. Under the Somali Istilam system, small and medium-sized Yemeni-owned or jointly owned vessels (10–40 tonnes) visit smaller landing sites to purchase catches from predominantly Somali fishers. Under Istiyaad, Yemeni fishers pay fees to undertake line fishing in Somali waters. Somali labourers are also employed by Yemeni and Omani businesses to search for frankincense. These activities create regular contacts and commercial dependencies that support legitimate exchange but may also be exploited by illicit intermediaries.

Geography and commerce linked these shores long before modern borders. Livestock, food, khat, consumer goods, people, capital and weapons have moved through networks connecting major ports with informal landing sites. Dhows, brokers and financial intermediaries serve overlapping markets: a vessel may carry lawful goods on one voyage and illicit cargo on another. The same infrastructure supports trade, fishing and migration, but can also facilitate weapons trafficking and irregular movement. Its mixed uses make the system resilient without rendering ordinary maritime commerce inherently criminal.

As Somalia's central authority collapsed in 1991, commercial networks, clan authorities, local administrations, armed factions and criminal entrepreneurs assumed greater influence over ports, roads and markets. Trade remained essential to survival, but fragmented authority widened opportunities for trafficking and armed-group logistics. The resulting political economy is decentralised yet anchored in relationships predating the collapse.

Yemen's protracted conflict has likewise transformed this interconnected maritime economy. Authority divided among the Houthis, the internationally recognised government and competing southern and local forces has fragmented control over territory, ports and coastal access. Prolonged warfare has entrenched smuggling, informal finance and armed patronage, multiplying the authorities and intermediaries through which cross-Gulf exchange operates. As in Somalia, commercial networks have survived weakened central institutions while becoming more vulnerable to exploitation by armed actors. The resulting system is not simply a channel for insecurity moving from Yemen towards Somalia: contested authority and overlapping war economies shape transactions in both directions.

The question is therefore not whether Somalia and Yemen are connected, but how this longstanding, multidirectional system is acquiring strategic functions, who benefits and how repeated transactions alter the capabilities and calculations of those involved. Responses that conflate legitimate connectivity with its exploitation risk damaging coastal livelihoods without weakening the networks responsible.

3. Converging Interests: Al-Shabaab, the Houthis and Pragmatic Cooperation

Al-Shabaab did not need to create an independent economic order. It embedded itself in existing markets and transport systems, extracting revenue and logistical advantage from commercial chains extending beyond its territorial control. Control over selected roads, crossings, traders, landing sites and checkpoints can confer power without ownership of the wider market.

Access to Yemen similarly depends on established brokers, dhow routes, informal landing sites and arms markets. These relationships lower procurement and contact costs and allow militant organisations to rely on commercially motivated intermediaries despite ideological differences. The Yemeni–Somali arms market is fluid: weapons move towards the shore where demand and prices are higher.

The Houthis have increasingly exploited this environment for different strategic purposes, drawing on more specialised military capabilities. Existing cross-Gulf networks offer access to the Somali shore without the visibility and expense of constructing an independent logistical system. The opportunity lay in adapting inherited infrastructure to new strategic purposes.

The resulting cooperation is therefore pragmatic and often ad hoc, based on functional complementarity rather than ideological alliance or operational merger. The Houthis and al-Shabaab remain politically and doctrinally distinct; pirates seek profit; brokers, smugglers, fishers and financiers respond to price, risk and opportunity. These differences constrain cooperation but do not prevent exchanges of specific services. Al-Shabaab contributes territorial access, intelligence and local logistics; intermediaries connect markets and move goods or value; and the Houthis contribute weapons, training and technical expertise while potentially gaining maritime intelligence and access beyond Yemen. Separate contributions can thus generate strategic effects without common command.

4. Arms, Access and Expertise: The Multidirectional Exchange of Capabilities

The assemblage carries distinct assets through different but interacting mechanisms: physical materiel, technical knowledge, personnel, maritime intelligence and finance.

Weapons and components are tangible and interceptable. Although arms have historically moved from Yemen to Somalia, flows also reverse with demand and prices. Dual-use commercial drone components now form part of this traffic. On 24 October 2025, Yemeni authorities intercepted a shipment of such components travelling from Djibouti to Hodeida, illustrating the wider regional supply chain described in the underlying research.

Technical knowledge behaves differently. Once absorbed, expertise can be retained, adapted and passed on beyond the original trainer, shipment or route. Houthi experience with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), improvised explosives, surveillance, communications and navigation is valuable to al-Shabaab. Even modest improvements in reconnaissance, targeting or commercial UAV weaponisation can change tactical conditions and compel Somali forces and the African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia (AUSSOM) to invest in countermeasures. Specialist instruction shortens the learning curve for these adaptations.

Personnel movement embeds knowledge within organisations. Al-Shabaab members travelling to Yemen for training can return with expertise that becomes part of local Somali units. This is not simply the transfer of supplies but a means of reproducing capability.

Organisational distance also lends the system resilience: brokers can be replaced, routes shifted and commercial relationships maintained when political contacts deteriorate. Yet the fieldwork also suggests tighter coordination along some newer routes, including reports of al-Shabaab representation in Yemen and attempts to deploy Houthi technical personnel to Lower Shabelle and Juba. These reported developments suggest that decentralised commercial exchange can coexist with more directed arrangements between particular armed actors; they do not establish an integrated command structure.

The fieldwork describes weapons and personnel being transported from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen to Galmudug and Lower Shabelle, beyond traditional northern routes, before onward movement by local vessels. It also reports the transport of Houthi technical personnel through the Indian Ocean to Lower Shabelle and Juba. If sustained, the use of remote southern anchorages would indicate that some al-Shabaab–Houthi contacts can bypass Somalia's established Gulf of Aden trading hubs, expanding the geographical scope of strategic access.

Maritime intelligence and operational access add a further dimension. Somali and Yemeni captains, dhow operators and fishers possess detailed knowledge of vessel behaviour, landing sites and coastal conditions that remote surveillance cannot replicate. Such local awareness and knowledge can support maritime targeting, transit and evasion.

Informal finance enables these exchanges. Legitimate transactions using EVC and hawala—including groups of up to twenty Yemeni fishers purchasing Somali catches through electronic payments coordinated by representatives in Mogadishu and Bosaso—illustrate how value moves without cash crossing the Gulf. Such systems matter commercially and may be exploited by illicit actors, but their use is not itself evidence of wrongdoing. Together, finance, personnel, maritime knowledge and material transfers enable capabilities to endure beyond any single transaction.

5. Piracy: The Reactivation of Maritime Capabilities

Somali piracy emerged from the maritime political economy sustaining fishing, trade, migration and smuggling. Hijacking requires more than armed crews: financiers, negotiators, suppliers, coastal protection, money-transfer systems and knowledge of vessels and routes. Much of this infrastructure can also support legitimate or other illicit activity.

The decline of large-scale piracy after 2012 did not erase these capabilities. Naval deployments, armed guards and changing shipping practices altered the economics of hijacking, but skills, relationships and accumulated wealth survived; some participants moved into fishing, trade or smuggling. The fieldwork identifies that former notable pirate leaders, including Ali 'Swahili', reportedly evaded capture and retained their fortunes, while others, such as Mohamed Abdi Hassan ('Afweyne'), were apprehended. Yet, these former pirate leaders retained ransom proceeds or escaped sustained asset confiscation. The retention of skills, contacts and resources helps explain how renewed incentives can reactivate dormant maritime capacity.

This does not mean pirates operate under Houthi direction. Piracy remains commercially driven, and its resurgence does not establish an operational alliance. Houthi attacks and the diversion of naval attention may nevertheless alter the surrounding security environment, creating opportunities for pirate syndicates. Independent activity can disrupt shipping, absorb naval resources and heighten uncertainty without common command.

The reported hijacking in May 2026 of the Togo-flagged tanker Eureka—two to three nautical miles from Yemen's Bi'r Ali oil terminal in Shabwah, reportedly involving Yemeni crew members—illustrates the geographical reach reported in the fieldwork. It suggests that maritime predation and associated networks can cross established geographical boundaries, although one incident alone cannot establish a durable, integrated piracy network across the Gulf.

Pirates bring capabilities distinct from those of al-Shabaab: boarding, vessel tracking, deep-water navigation, mothership operations and knowledge of the Somali Basin and the Gulf of Aden. Their criminal rather than overtly military profile can create indirect strategic utility for other actors without implying that those actors command or finance them.

Piracy may also produce indirect strategic advantages for the Houthis. Even without operational coordination, renewed attacks can intensify maritime insecurity, increase insurance and transport costs and put additional pressure on naval deployments. These effects can compound disruption to energy shipments and general trade, though they do not demonstrate Houthi control of pirate activity.

6. The Somali Coast as Strategic Depth

Geography gives cross-Gulf exchange wider strategic significance. The Houthis have demonstrated how territory in Yemen, combined with missiles, drones and maritime intelligence, can affect regional shipping. Operations concentrated on the Yemeni shore, however, face military constraints and exposure to air strikes. Relationships across the Gulf can extend access and situational awareness without conventional territorial expansion.

Somalia's approximately 3,300-kilometre coastline extends along the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean, with numerous informal landing sites in a divided political environment. Maritime communities possess local knowledge, while established commercial and illicit networks provide intermediaries through whom outside actors can operate without building conspicuous infrastructure.

A permanent Houthi base in Somalia is not required for strategic access. Repeated use of vessels, brokers, landing sites and locally sourced maritime information can provide practical advantages while limiting visibility. Strategic depth can therefore rest on relationships rather than territorial possession. The Somali shore is not merely a destination for weapons or a source of piracy; it is part of the geography through which competition over Yemen, Bab el-Mandeb and the western Indian Ocean is conducted.

7. The Changing Strategic Geography: Regional and External Powers

The trans-Gulf assemblage is increasingly embedded in regional and external competition. Maritime investments, security partnerships and surveillance arrangements can alter the value of existing routes and create incentives for armed and commercial intermediaries to seek access to them.

Türkiye has expanded its presence on the African shore through maritime security and resource-related cooperation with Mogadishu. Its engagement is illustrated by Çağrı Bey, a state-of-the-art ultra-deepwater drilling vessel undertaking offshore oil exploration at the Curad-1 well, accompanied by modern support vessels including the Sancar, a state-of-the-art drone ship, and protected by other Turkish naval ships. Cooperation on fishing, licensing and offshore development also places Ankara prominently within Somalia's maritime sector and its contested governance.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a major partner for Somaliland and Puntland, influencing regional security and coastguard infrastructure, including the Puntland Maritime Police Force. These relationships intersect with disputes over regional autonomy and Mogadishu's efforts to consolidate authority, creating different channels of maritime engagement along the Somali coast.

Israel's engagement with Somaliland adds another dimension. For Somaliland, the relationship offers potential diplomatic and security advantages, as well as deterrence against Mogadishu and what it perceives as a Turkish threat; for Israel, access to the African shore could improve awareness of developments opposite Yemen.

Iran, a principal external supporter of the Houthis, also has a commercial maritime presence through fishing vessels and associated activity. Local interlocutors, including those concerned with Somaliland and Somali maritime enforcement, report suspected illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing by some Iranian vessels amid contested licensing regimes. Particular vessels could potentially support Houthi resupply, but fishing activity alone cannot substantiate such a role. Other Iranian vessels reportedly hold legitimate licences, purchase supplies along the coast and contribute to local commerce. The analytical task is to distinguish lawful activity, suspected fishing violations and alleged military logistics rather than conflate them.

Together, these external relationships create three interconnected pressures. First, Turkish security partnerships and Israeli–Emirati cooperation may be interpreted by their respective partners as counterweights, producing mutual suspicion and risks of escalation. Second, accusations linking external actors to piracy or other organised crime can circulate as political narratives; such allegations should not be treated as proof of operational involvement. Third, facilities and access arrangements on the

Somali coast can connect Gulf of Aden competition to conflicts beyond Somalia and Yemen. These dynamics are illustrated by Emirati use of Somali facilities in connection with evacuations of Southern Transitional Council allies from Yemen and movements associated with Sudan, as well as reports concerning sophisticated Israeli surveillance equipment at an Emirati-linked site in Bosaso. These specific allegations require corroboration before they can support firm conclusions. Collectively, they suggest that coastal access may be valued for regional intelligence and mobility as much as for Somalia-specific operations.

For the Houthis, competing surveillance and security access across the Gulf increase the value of Somali maritime contacts. Brokers, landing sites and local knowledge can matter for intelligence and access as well as procurement. Conversely, deeper Houthi engagement heightens other actors' interest in monitoring Yemen from the African shore. These reciprocal pressures draw established commercial relationships into wider competition over Bab el-Mandeb and the western Indian Ocean.

8. Somalia's Domestic Politics as a Security Mechanism

Somalia's political divisions directly shape its ability to manage maritime risks. Tensions between the Federal Government in Mogadishu and Puntland are particularly consequential: Puntland administers an extensive coast facing Yemen and plays a central role in counter-piracy, trafficking and operations against al-Shabaab and Islamic State militants.

Where federal and Puntland institutions distrust one another, intelligence sharing weakens, authority is contested and maritime incidents become politicised. The vulnerability is not simply inadequate equipment. Political fragmentation prevents institutions from developing a common, actionable understanding of activity across Somali waters.

Illicit actors can exploit these divided jurisdictions. Brokers and armed networks adapt routes and contacts across political boundaries while authorities operate through competing centres. Bosaso and Berbera illustrate the importance of differently governed coastal gateways. External actors can also cultivate local security and commercial relationships without passing through a coherent national framework.

Somaliland's relationships with Israel and the UAE further complicate the picture. Shared concerns about Mogadishu's centralisation and some overlapping external partnerships can encourage pragmatic cooperation between Somaliland and Puntland, even as their territorial and political rivalries persist.

Beyond institutional coordination, political fragmentation weakens the everyday governance on which maritime monitoring depends. Somali and Yemeni fishers may have limited incentives to use Automatic Identification Systems (AIS) amid confusing licensing arrangements, uneven enforcement and weak search-and-rescue provision. Where fishers see little practical safety benefit from monitoring, compliance and trust may remain low. Some illicit fishing operators may deliberately disable AIS, further complicating attempts to distinguish lawful fishing from smuggling or piracy. AIS use also varies by vessel class and applicable requirements; its absence alone is not proof of illicit activity.

External competition and domestic fragmentation thus reinforce one another. As the coast becomes more strategically valuable, outside actors have stronger incentives to cultivate differentiated local relationships. Divided Somali authority, in turn, makes these arrangements harder to monitor through a coherent national framework. Fragmentation on both shores allows cross-Gulf networks to operate across competing jurisdictions, while weak coordination reduces the capacity of either country to contain their strategic exploitation.

9. From Security Assemblage to Distributed Capability

The strategic significance of this assemblage lies in the distribution of capabilities across actors who do not share a command structure. Commercial brokers sustain routes and transactions; armed groups provide access, protection and technical expertise; maritime operators contribute mobility and local intelligence; and informal finance connects transactions across jurisdictions. No participant needs to control the whole system for it to produce strategic effects.

The decisive feature is the reproduction of capabilities, not merely the maintenance of routes. Repeated transactions can allow military knowledge, maritime intelligence and operational access to outlast the disruption of particular shipments or intermediaries. Indicators of a more dependable system would include repeated movement of specialist personnel, local adaptation of acquired expertise, reuse of the same brokers across distinct operations and rapid substitution of routes after interdiction. Such patterns would suggest that episodic transactions are becoming a durable source of military capability.

10. Policy Implications

The policy problem is not the maritime economy but the use of its commercial infrastructure for armed purposes. Authorities therefore need to investigate recurring brokerage relationships, financial facilitation and access arrangements alongside individual seizures. Because legitimate livelihoods depend on many of the same routes and services, enforcement must be intelligence-led and distinguish ordinary commerce from demonstrated illicit activity.

Knowledge transfer presents a different challenge from weapons interdiction. Once technical expertise has been absorbed and adapted within an armed organisation, intercepting later shipments may not reverse its effects. Responses should therefore combine maritime and financial investigations with monitoring of specialist exchanges and appropriate defensive capacity. Piracy requires a similarly differentiated approach: its capabilities may have indirect strategic consequences without an operational alliance with militant organisations.

These priorities, however, cannot be met through interdiction alone. Federal–regional distrust, fragmented maritime jurisdiction and competing external security partnerships obstruct shared awareness across Somali waters. As coastal access becomes more important to competition involving Yemen and Bab el-Mandeb, an effective response requires coordinated intelligence, accountable external engagement and sustained national and regional maritime capacity.

11. Recommendations

1. Establish an integrated trans-Gulf intelligence and analytical framework. Somalia's federal and regional maritime and security institutions, working with AUSSOM and international partners, should consolidate information on vessel movements, piracy, arms trafficking, financial intermediaries, technical personnel and emerging capabilities. Investigations should prioritise recurring relationships and the reproduction of operational access rather than individual seizures alone.

2. Restore federal–regional maritime security cooperation. The Federal Government of Somalia, Puntland and Somaliland should establish practical information-sharing arrangements covering suspicious vessels, trafficking, piracy and militant activity, insulated as far as possible from political disputes. Joint maritime awareness should integrate coastguard capabilities, port intelligence, vessel monitoring and reporting from coastal communities, particularly along northern maritime routes.

3. Address the transfer and reproduction of military capabilities. Somali security institutions and AUSSOM, supported by relevant partners, should monitor specialist personnel, training networks, dual-use technologies and maritime intelligence exchanges. Counter-UAV systems, electronic countermeasures, dispersion, camouflage and force-protection measures should be developed in parallel, recognising that technical expertise can outlast the routes through which it was acquired.

4. Disrupt illicit networks without criminalising legitimate maritime commerce. Maritime, customs, financial and counter-terrorism authorities should connect investigations into piracy, trafficking and militant logistics while distinguishing criminal intermediaries from lawful traders, fishers and financial service providers. Enforcement should target recurring facilitators and access arrangements while protecting the commercial networks on which coastal livelihoods depend.

5. Reduce external rivalry and strengthen regional maritime coordination. Relevant international partners should facilitate practical deconfliction among Türkiye, the UAE and Israel over maritime security activities affecting the Somali coast, without

prejudging Somalia's sovereignty or the legal status of contested territories. The Djibouti Code of Conduct/Jeddah Amendment could support complementary technical cooperation on suspicious maritime movements, dual-use technologies, and trans-Gulf networks, with safeguards for sensitive information.

6. Build sustainable Somali maritime and analytical capacity. Somali institutions and their partners should invest in the personnel, systems and inter-agency arrangements needed to integrate maritime, financial, technical and political intelligence across jurisdictions. Monitoring should extend beyond permanent bases to recurring access through vessels, landing sites, brokers and local protection arrangements. Effectiveness should be assessed by the disruption of persistent illicit relationships, reduced capability diffusion and improved institutional cooperation.

12. Conclusion: The Strategic Repurposing of an Old Maritime System

Somali and Yemeni communities have long treated the Gulf of Aden as a shared space of commerce, migration and exchange. State collapse and protracted conflict changed the authorities governing that space; pirates and armed movements exploited parts of it. The present transformation lies in the growing use of established relationships to transfer military knowledge, maritime intelligence and operational access across distinct conflicts.

Competition over the African shore—including Israel's engagement with Somaliland, the UAE's relationships with Puntland and Somaliland, and Türkiye's support for Mogadishu—has increased the strategic value of these connections. Houthi maritime operations add urgency to the contest over access and surveillance, while Somalia's divided political order obstructs the shared awareness needed to manage the resulting risks.

The challenge is not to sever a centuries-old maritime economy but to prevent its legitimate relationships from becoming dependable instruments of military capability. Maritime security will increasingly depend on addressing the brokers, knowledge transfers and access arrangements that build and sustain these capabilities rather than simply intercepting the vessels that carry them.

About RAPRI

RAAD Peace Research Institute (RAPRI) is an independent policy research institute based in Mogadishu, Somalia. Established in 2021, RAPRI conducts research and policy analysis across East Africa and the Horn of Africa, focusing on peace and security, governance, political settlements, geopolitics, climate-related security risks and development. Through policy briefs, research reports, scenario analysis and policy dialogue, the Institute seeks to inform public debate and support evidence-based policy formulation and decision-making.

Contact and online presence

Mogadishu, Somalia
Website: www.rapri.org
Email: contact@rapri.org
X (Twitter): @PeaceRaad
LinkedIn: RAAD Peace Research Institute