DRYAD GLOBAL

REGIONAL MARITIME INTELLIGENCE

Maritime disruption in the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin

2025-26

Piracy resurgence and the Houthi-Al-Shabaab-IRGC nexus

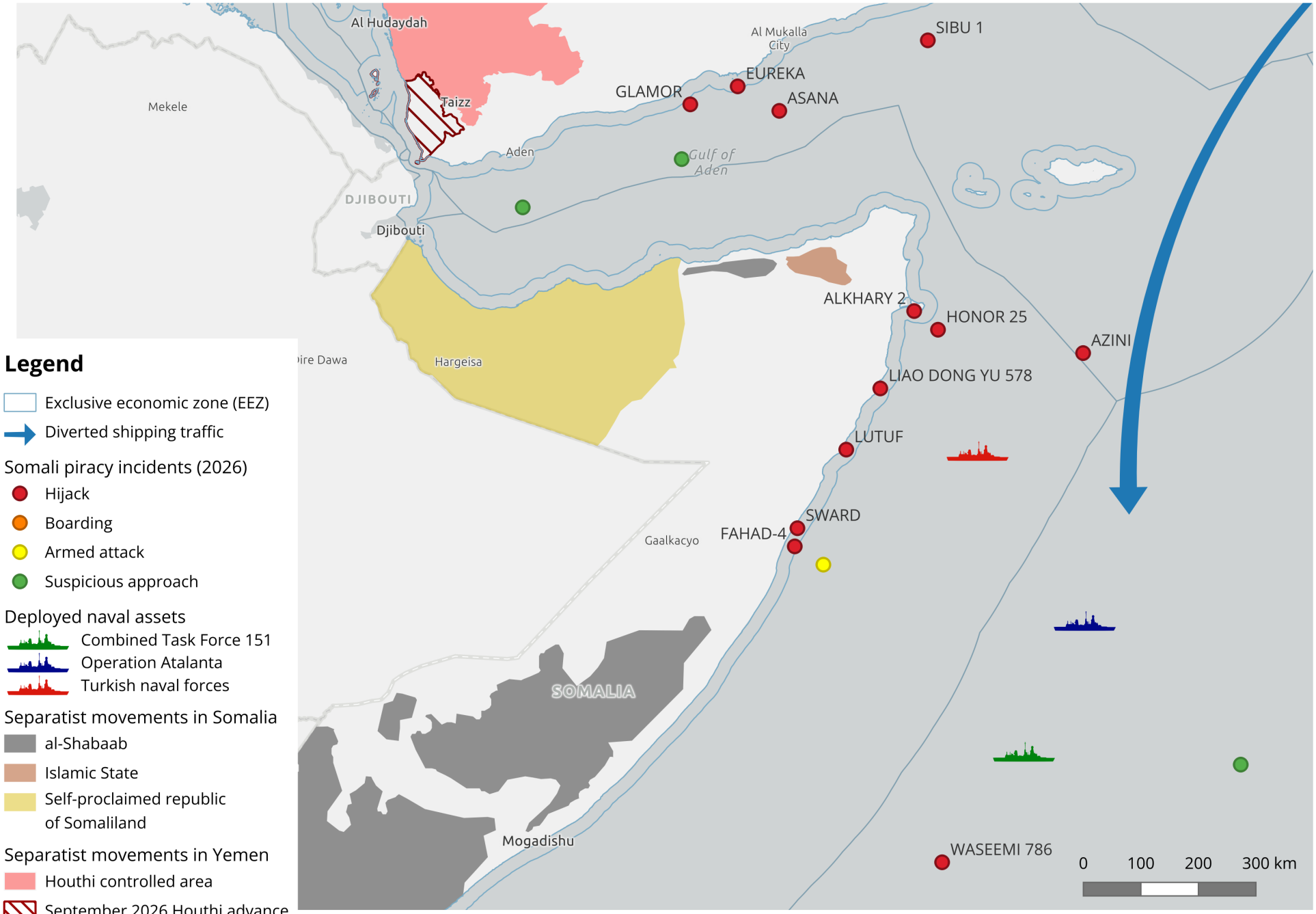
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Gulf of Aden / Bab el-Mandeb / Somali Basin

Maritime intelligence, verified.

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Author: Noah Trowbridge, Dryad Global | Sources: ESRI, Flanders Marine Institute | November 2026

SECTION 1

Introduction

In the Gulf of Aden, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Somali Basin, piracy has reemerged as a significant threat to commercial shipping. After a lull in piracy from 2012 to 2024, when incidents were limited to zero or a couple per year, piracy has begun to increase since 2024. This rise has accelerated further so far in 2026. The rise in piracy is driven by state weakness and diverted international naval efforts, which have increased pirates' ability to operate. Moreover, weapons and finance networks that connect Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) logistics with Al-Shabaab, Houthis, and Pirate Action Groups ('PAGs') also incentivise piracy.

Pirate activity represents a significant threat to commercial operations, both in Somali territorial waters and offshore. The financial objective of Somali pirates is to hijack vessels and then pressure the relevant stakeholders into providing the group with a ransom payment in exchange for the return of the crew/vessel. As the Houthis also play a major role in this network, they also assist pirate activity, especially in the Gulf of Aden. With the monsoon season recently ending, pirates have favourable weather conditions to use motherships to attack commercial vessels at a significant distance from the coast (up to several hundred nautical miles).

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SECTION 2

Incident picture, 2025-26

In the late 2000s, piracy emerged as a significant issue in the Gulf of Aden and the Somali basin. At its peak, in 2011, over 230 attacks were recorded, with piracy costing shippers and governments around $7 billion during this period. The resurgence of piracy since 2024 threatens to similarly increase the costs to shippers and governments.

In the period between January to September 2026, the International Maritime Bureau recorded a rise in Somali piracy activity, with 15 recorded incidents of Somali piracy. They also note that Somali pirates accounted for 94% of all crew taken hostage globally. The figures from international anti-piracy missions indicate that the rate of piracy incidents is likely even higher. On 24 August 2026, the Royal Navy reported that the international anti-piracy mission, Combined Task Force 151, had responded to 25 piracy-related incidents between 24 February and 24 August 2026.

As of early November, the following successful hijackings/armed robberies have been recorded in the region:

15

Recorded Somali piracy incidents

Jan-Sep 2026 | IMB

94%

Share of crew taken hostage globally

Attributed to Somali pirates | IMB

25

Piracy-related incidents handled

24 Feb-24 Aug 2026 | CTF 151

INCIDENT REGISTER / EARLY NOVEMBER 2026

DATE / VESSEL	FLAG / IMO	POSITION	OUTCOME
29 October 2026 AZINI	Iran (no IMO number)	Northeastern Somalia (exact position not provided)	Vessel hijacked, 23 crew taken hostage, freed by Indian Navy on 2 November
20 August 2026 SIBU 1	Missing flag data/ intermediate ownership (IMO: 920476)	136 nautical miles east of Al Mukalla, Yemen	Vessel hijacked, crew freed in September 2026, conflicting claims regarding whether it was freed by the Puntland Maritime Police Force or members from the Iraqi Al-Shaghanba tribal clan
17 August 2026 LUTUF	Cameroon (IMO: 9109134)	5 nautical miles south of Maraya, Eli District, Somalia	Hijacked, crew were freed in joint Turkish-Somalian operation
17 July 2026 ASANA	Tanzania (IMO: 9035838)	65 nautical miles south of Al Mukala, Yemen	Hijacked, 20 crew currently held for ransom
2 May 2026 EUREKA	Togo (IMO: 1022823)	Near Qana port, Shabwa Governorate, Yemen	Hijacked, crew were released on 30 September
27 April 2026 SWARD	Saint Kitts and Nevis (IMO: 9174244)	6 nautical miles northeast of Garacad, Somalia	Hijacked, mothership, open-source crew figures are inconsistent (estimated as either 15 or 17), entire crew released on 15 September 2025, unknown ransom amount paid
25 April 2026 FAHAD-4	UAE (no IMO number)	10 nautical miles off the coast of Dhinowda, northeastern Somalia	Hijacked, vessel later abandoned, crew released
21 April 2026 HONOUR 25	Palau (IMO: 1099735)	30 nautical miles off the coast of Puntland	Hijacked, 17 crew members were held until an operation by Puntland forces in late September, 5 crew were killed before the vessel was recovered

INCIDENT REGISTER / CONTINUED

INCIDENT REGISTER / EARLY NOVEMBER 2026

DATE / VESSEL	FLAG / IMO	POSITION	OUTCOME
20 April 2026 ALKHARY 2	Somalia (No IMO number)	Off the coast of Hafun	Hijacked, mothership, vessel and crew later released
25 March 2026 WASEEMI 786	Iran (No IMO Number)	400 nautical miles off Puntland	Hijacked, mothership, crew released in early April
1 January 2026 LIAO DONG YU 578	China (IMO: 8590350)	Just off the coast of Bandarbeyla, Puntland	Hijacked, crew and vessel released

Consistent with historical trends, most piracy occurs in littoral areas because commercial vessels are easier to reach in these areas. Nevertheless, there has been a general increase in PAGs targeting high-value tankers in the Gulf of Aden, likely in coordination with the Houthis, due to the high ransom payments that they can demand for these vessels. For example, Somali pirates are currently demanding $10 million in ransom for the release of the EUREKA and its crew. Stakeholders regularly struggle to pay these high ransom amounts. Consequently, an estimated 20 crew members, belonging to at least one vessel, remain hostage. This includes crew members that have been held several months after the hijacking date, including the crew of ASANA.

During the recent surge in piracy, pirates have increased their use of large vessels as motherships (e.g. the cement carrier SWARD was repurposed as a mothership). Even though Somali pirates engage in cooperation with Al-Shabaab and the Houthis, the selection of targets does not demonstrate a clear pattern, as hijacked vessels have had a wide range of ownership. The recent hijacking of SIBU 1 shows this. Since the hijacking, its missing flag data has led to it continuing to be classified as having indeterminate ownership, although the vessel is believed to be part of the Iranian shadow fleet.

SECTION 3

Why has pirate activity returned?

Over the last few years, the Somali Federal Government's longstanding weaknesses in exerting control have further deteriorated, creating ideal conditions for piracy. In early 2026, officials in the South-West state announced their intention to sever ties with the Federal Government. This decision was primarily motivated by President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud's constitutional reforms to extend the presidential term, along with other changes. From the perspective of officials in the South-West state, and many others in the country, Mohamud's reforms are an effort to restrict democracy.

After the South-West state announced its desire to sever ties, the Federal Government seized control of Baidoa, the state's administrative capital, in March 2026. Even after the government seized the city, intermittent clashes have continued in the city's outskirts between the federal government and forces aligned with the state government. The potential loss of the South-West state poses a significant risk to the Federal Government's authority, especially as it mirrors similar independence movements in recent years. For example, in 2024, the semi-autonomous state of Puntland announced it would begin operating independently of the federal government. In addition to these state-level secessionist movements, the federal government faces an ongoing threat from Al-Shabaab. Despite continued military operations against the group, Al-Shabaab remains in control of around 30% of Somalia, mainly in the south. With these multifaceted security threats, the government has been unable to adequately allocate resources to anti-piracy missions.

Furthermore, the increased commercial traffic in the Somali basin has created increased opportunities for piracy to occur due to the increased volume of potential targets. The twofold maritime disruptions of Houthi attacks on the Red Sea and IRGC attacks on commercial shipping in the Strait of Hormuz have caused a growing number of ships to reroute via the Cape of Good Hope and via the northeastern coast of Somalia. This rerouting has placed a higher percentage of vessels within the range of Somali pirate attacks. Conversely, vessel transits in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden have declined by 60-70% in recent months, primarily as many shipping companies have bypassed this route due to the threat levels.

In response to the situation in the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea, anti-piracy naval missions have reduced their scope. Various high-end units have been diverted from combating piracy to these other theatres. The primary international anti-piracy task force is the Combined Task Force 151, which operates broadly throughout the region. Moreover, the European Union's anti-piracy mission, Operation ATALANTA, is also present in the region, and participates in coordinated exercises/patrols with the Combined Force 151. This mission's mandate extends until February 2027. The EU is yet to confirm whether it will be extended beyond this date. However, it will likely be renewed due to the high rates of piracy. While these missions play a valuable role in addressing piracy, they have failed to prevent the current increase in piracy.

WHY HAS PIRATE ACTIVITY RETURNED? / CONTINUED

In the anti-piracy missions in 2011, and the following several years, piracy was nearly eliminated by the operation of up to 30 warships simultaneously operating through three overlapping missions. Contrastingly, the EU's Operation Atalanta is limited to roughly two vessels and air assets deployed simultaneously, while some Combined Task Force 151 assets have been diverted to the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea. Although the extent of the diversions is currently unknown. The reduced scale of these missions has prevented them from effectively covering the wide geographic area where piracy occurs. In recent months, the resource limitations have worsened as ship diversions have caused vessels to undertake fewer dedicated escort or patrol days in the traditional IRTC/Somali Basin area.

In response to these issues, countries adhering to the Djibouti Code of Conduct Task Force signed a proposal in July 2026 to establish a task force to enhance existing anti-piracy efforts. The exact scope and details of this task force are still being determined.

Somalia signed a pivotal 10-year bilateral Defence and Economic Cooperation Agreement with Türkiye in 2024, which includes Turkish assistance in anti-piracy measures. Although this agreement can help with piracy to an extent, it cannot comprehensively combat piracy. Turkish anti-piracy assistance does not replace ongoing missions, as it mainly relates to hostage recovery. Unlike international anti-piracy missions that seek to deter and proactively stop pirate activity through an ongoing presence.

SECTION 4

Houthi-Al-Shabaab-IRGC-pirate links

Since at least 2021, Iran has utilised Somalia, specifically the semi-autonomous northwestern region of Puntland, as an entry point for small arms and light weapons that are intended to reach the Houthi rebels in northwestern Yemen. Once the weapons reach Puntland, they are handled by the terrorist group Al-Shabaab, which keeps a portion of the weapons itself, while others are sent across the Gulf of Aden to Yemen. The regional weapons trade includes both small arms, and advanced weapons. For example, on 11 January 2024, the US Navy vessel the USS Lewis B Puller intercepted a dhow off the coast of Somalia on its way to Houthi-controlled Yemen that was carrying advanced weapons (including propulsion, guidance, and warhead components for medium-range ballistic missiles and anti-ship missiles).

On paper, Al-Shabaab and the Houthis are ideologically opposed. Al-Shabaab is a Salafi-Islamist group, while the Houthis follow Zaydism, a branch of Shia Islam. Yet the 2025 letter from the Panel of Experts on Yemen (S/2025/650) highlights that these groups have cooperated. Despite their differing ideological perspectives, cooperation has been driven by the mutual benefits provided by their relationship. The report states that the two groups have strengthened cooperation in various areas, including weapons smuggling, technical training and operational tactics.

Al-Shabaab-Houthi cooperation also extends to piracy operations. While Al-Shabaab technically holds that piracy is a forbidden practice (‘haram’), they have coordinated with piracy networks in Somalia. Al-Shabaab facilitates the transfer of technological equipment to PAGs, including advanced GPS satellite devices and satellite phones, which support their ability to coordinate attacks.

This assistance benefits Al-Shabaab because the group receives a share of the ransom payments from successful pirate operations. In addition to the financial component, the maintenance of high levels of piracy also serves their strategic interests, as it diverts some key Federal Government resources away from military actions against Al-Shabaab.

Similarly, the Houthis also aid Somali pirates. While the Houthis lack control or significant influence over Somali pirates, the groups nevertheless have an overlapping desire to disrupt commercial shipping. This confluence of interests has led to cooperation. In June 2026, a Yemeni military intelligence report assessed that a pirate group that was involved with the hijacking of the Togo-flagged EUREKA in May 2026 met with Houthi officials to coordinate the targeting of these vessels. While the information on additional meetings and cooperation between these groups is limited, an analysis of recent attacks, along with the group’s overlapping interests, suggests cooperation is taking place. Throughout 2026, several piracy incidents have been recorded in quick succession in the Gulf of Aden. This indicates high levels of coordination by PAGs. For example, on 1 and 2 May 2026, two separate incidents of skiffs approaching bulk carriers were recorded in close distance of one another in the Gulf of Aden. Although these incidents did not translate to

HOUTHI–AL–SHABAAB–IRGC–PIRATE LINKS / CONTINUED

successful hijackings and it is unconfirmed whether these incidents had Houthi involvement, it is likely that the Houthis assisted with these incidents. These incidents occurred on the same day, or the preceding day, as the hijacking of the EUREKA, which the aforementioned Yemeni intelligence report states occurred with Houthi coordination, in the Gulf of Aden. As such, it is likely that these attacks also occurred with Houthi involvement, especially as the EUREKA was hijacked relatively close to the other incidents.

The Houthis and pirates mutually benefit from cooperation. As part of this network, pirates receive improved technology to carry out piracy, while the Houthis receive a share of ransom payments. Somalian authorities have highlighted this cooperation. For example, in May 2026, Puntland's Maritime Police Force Deputy Director of Intelligence, Muhamed Musa Abulle, stated that the Houthis have provided pirates with weapons and GPS devices that assist in their ability to track vessels. Additionally, Somalian authorities have revealed that pirates have begun utilising Starlink to coordinate their attacks. It remains unconfirmed how the pirates received this technology from the Houthis to advance their abilities to engage in successful hijackings. However, Al-Shabaab may have also provided the group with this technology.

From a financial perspective, the Houthis, Al-Shabaab and pirates are incentivised to maintain pirate activity in the Gulf of Aden. Shipping companies are more likely to pay to secure safe passage when the threat landscape is elevated. While the fee from these payments remains below what the Houthis received during the height of their Red Sea attacks, they can still be significant. At present, there is a lack of verified information regarding the distribution of passage fees (and ransom payments) between these groups; however, it is highly likely that this financial sharing occurs. From the perspective of the Houthis and Al-Shabaab, even though piracy aligns with their strategic interests, it is highly improbable that they would provide weapons and logistics without a financial incentive.

It remains unclear whether Iran derives direct financial benefits from these ransom payments. Even if Iran does not profit directly from piracy, these networks remain essential to its regional influence. Through the IRGC, Iran uses these networks to transport weapons and other technology, as well as to facilitate disruptions to commercial shipping through its proxies. In the context of the ongoing Iran War, the control exercised by its proxy, the Houthis, over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, together with their ability to coordinate attacks with PAGs in the Gulf of Aden, enhances their capacity to disrupt commercial shipping in ways that serve to undermine the interests of Western and other hostile states. Although Iran can exert leverage over these proxies, particularly because it serves as the point of origin for these weapons and logistics networks, its relationship with these groups is primarily based on shared strategic interests rather than direct, top-down control by the IRGC.

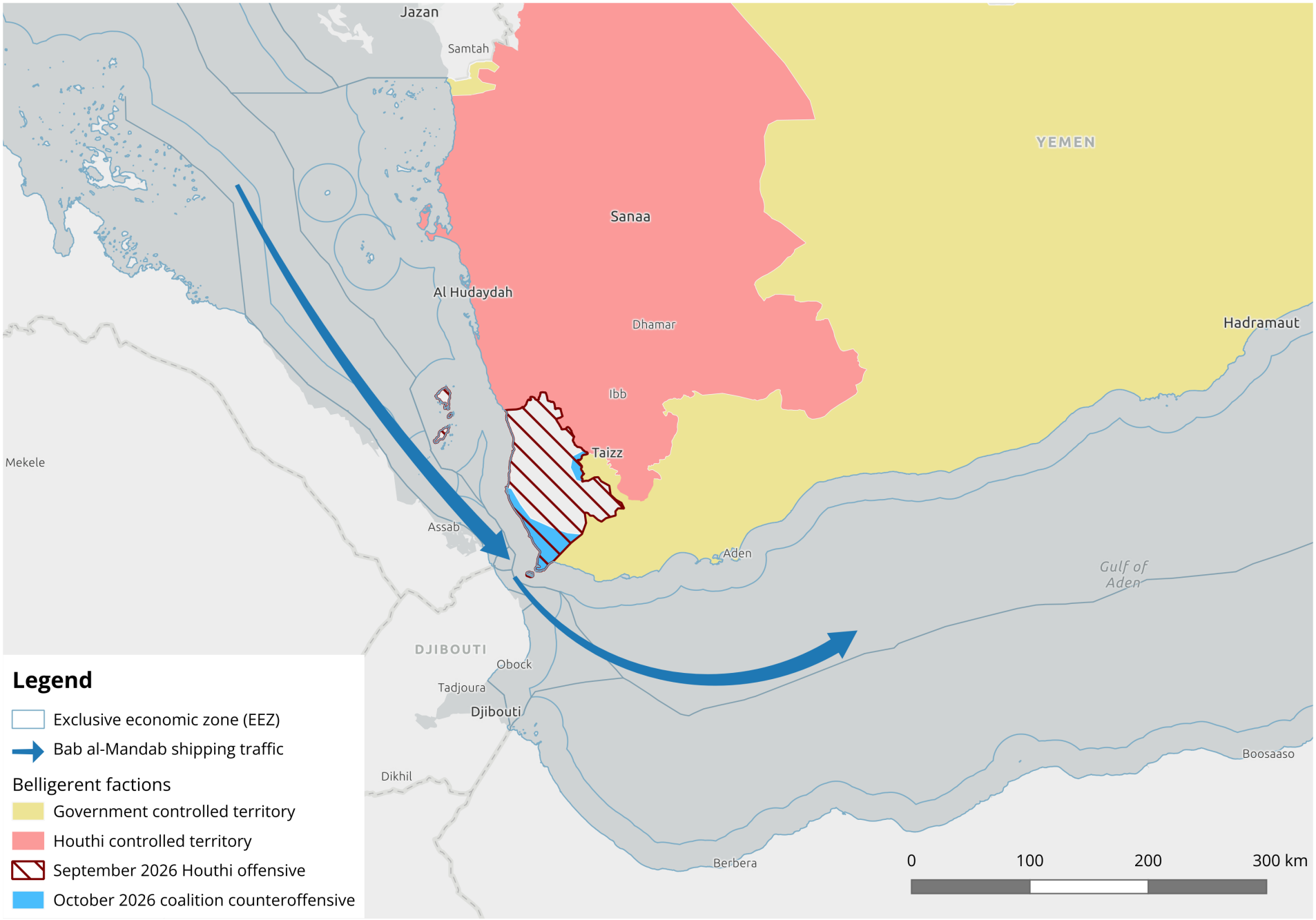
SECTION 5

Implications for owners, charterers, underwriters

Currently, the risk to shipowners, charters, and underwriters is significant in the Gulf of Aden and the Somali Basin, with multiple crews held and regular pirate activity in these waters. In the near-term, this risk is expected to heighten further. The recent Houthi activity in Yemen indicates the increasing dual threat environment in the Gulf of Aden. In September 2026, Houthi forces launched a major operation throughout southwestern Yemen wherein they captured around 5,400 square kilometres of territory along the strategically significant southwest coast. The Houthis' seizures include the valuable port city of Mocha, which is located around 80km north of the Bab el-Mandeb, and Perim Island within the Bab el-Mandeb strait. With the Houthis improved strategic position on the Bab el-Mandeb, they will likely seek to coordinate with Somali pirate groups to solidify the dual threat environment. The Houthis can utilise cooperation with PAGs to disrupt shipping along the Gulf of Aden and disrupt the southern entrance to the Bab el-Mandeb, especially vis-à-vis Saudi Arabian shipping. In doing so, the Houthis can enhance their capacity to extract concessions from Saudi Arabia.

However, the Houthis control over the Bab el-Mandeb has been constrained to an extent by the Saudi-backed Presidential Leadership Council's ('PLC') Operation Dawn of Yemen. Launched in September 2026, the operation has recaptured key areas along the Bab el-Mandeb, including the port city of Mocha on 5 October 2026. Houthi forces have denied PLC claims that they recaptured the city. Additionally, on 6 October 2026, Türkiye and Pakistan announced they are sending troops to assist Saudi Arabia in the conflict, in accordance with their mutual defence agreement. As these forces will concentrate their efforts on Yemen and the northern side of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to repel the Houthis, it may facilitate a further increase in piracy; this is especially the case if Turkish resources are diverted from Somalia to Yemen.

MAP 02 / BAB EL-MANDEB AND SOUTHWESTERN YEMEN



Author: Noah Trowbridge, Dryad Global | Sources: ESRI, Flanders Marine Institute | October 2026

IMPLICATIONS FOR OWNERS, CHARTERERS, UNDERWRITERS / CONTINUED

Over the next few months, anti-piracy mission will affect the risk to commercial shipping. While the European Union will likely renew Operation ATALANTA beyond February 2027, the mission's scale will influence the piracy threat. If the EU increases the number of assets deployed as part of this mission, it will assist in addressing the continued issues with the diversion of Combined Task Force 151 resources. Even though Operation ATALANTA and Combined Task Force 151 continue to play an important role in anti-piracy operations, they cannot address piracy alone. Throughout 2026, the Somalian Government has repeatedly called on greater coordinated international action to address the rise in piracy. Thus far, these appeals have been largely ignored; instead, the international community continues to overlook piracy in favour of other pressing geopolitical concerns.

Ostensibly, the newly formed Djibouti Code of Conduct Task Force (consisting of 22 signatory member states across the Western Indian Ocean and surrounding regions), is an answer to these requests. However, it is unlikely that the mission will be sufficient to address the shortfall in anti-piracy resources. The signatory states, in general, lack the economic or naval resources to divert to addressing piracy at the required scale.

Ultimately, owners, charterers, and underwriters face a high-risk environment. This is largely driven by inadequate anti-piracy measures throughout the region and expanded Houthi-pirate coordination, which has created a dual-threat environment in the Gulf of Aden.

SECTION 6

Outlook

In the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin, piracy is no longer a residual policy issue. Rather, it has reemerged as a ransom operation fueled by Somali state weakness and an existing logistics network that transports Iranian-origin weapons to Yemen and Al-Shabaab. Commercial ships face a heightened risk of hijacking, and extended detention in the short-term. While the risk environment is expected to further deteriorate, it is unlikely that it will cause a complete shutdown in commercial shipping analogous to 2011.

On 28 October 2026, the UKMTO noted receiving numerous reports of PAG activity in the Gulf of Aden. Shortly after, on 30 October, the EU's Operation ATALANTA posted a suspicious activity alert showing a PAG operating in the region. In this context, over the next few months, the risk to vessels transiting these waters is heightened.

As the monsoon season recently subsided, PAGs have favorable conditions to operate a considerable distance from shore using motherships. With Somali piracy operating as a part of a broader logistics network, piracy rates will likely increase as the Houthis continue to face funding pressures and a desire to solidify control over the Gulf of Aden/Bab el-Mandeb Strait to enhance its coercive power vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. In the near future, transit through the Gulf of Aden and Somali Basin should be viewed as high risk, due to the resurgence in pirate activity.

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