

Why did France resort to violence off the coast of Somalia?

By Olivier Laurent
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The use of force April 10 to recover five French hostages held off the Somali coast, on the yacht, the *Tanit*, demonstrates the contempt of the Nicolas Sarkozy government for the lives of the French hostages and the Somali pirates, as well as for French and Somali public opinion.

The French government used the episode to bring its policy into line with that of the Obama administration, which used deadly force in response to the seizing of the *Maersk Alabama*, an American ship, and the taking hostage by Somali pirates of its captain, Richard Phillips. On April 7, US Navy snipers shot to death three of the pirates holding Phillips.



Somali pirates seized the *Tanit*, a 12.5 meter-long yacht, on April 4 in the Gulf of Aden. The vessel was re-taken six days later, after an assault by French commandos that resulted in the death of two Somali pirates and the skipper of the *Tanit*, Florent Lemaçon, after an exchange of fire.

The three pirates, aged between 23 and 27, captured during the French operation, were arrested and imprisoned. They join 12 other pirates currently held in French prisons for the hostage taking in 2008 of two other yachts off the Somali coast, the *Ponant* and the *Carré d'As*. They were charged with “ship hijacking” and “arbitrary kidnapping and detention in an organized group.”

On April 17, the public prosecutor in Rennes, Hervé Pavy, announced that Lemaçon’s autopsy makes it impossible to determine the origin of the bullet that killed him. Pavy,

however, stated that the answer could be obtained after the “absolutely necessary inspection of the boat” and the examining “of the weapons used by the pirates, which were recovered.”

Minister of Defense Hervé Morin stated after the recapture of the yacht that it “cannot be excluded” that the death of Lemaçon was due to fire from the French forces. He emphasised that the operation carried out by the French military was “the most feasible solution.” Morin added that Paris had offered a ransom to the pirates, without specifying the amount.

These facts underline French responsibility for the three deaths on the *Tanit*. Whatever the origin of the bullet that killed Lemaçon, the decision to launch the assault, and therefore put his life in danger, rests entirely with the French authorities. Nothing indicates that the pirates were about to execute their hostages. In fact, it was absolutely against their interests to do so, since they had no chance of escaping without them.

The obvious contempt of the French authorities for the lives of the Somalis will only increase the hatred for French imperialism among the ordinary masses on the Horn of Africa, where France has been and continues to act as a colonial power.

Djibouti, which borders Somalia on the northwest, was France’s last African colony and for many years critical to its ability to monitor the sea lanes between Suez and French colonies in Indochina. Djibouti only obtained its independence in 1977, but France still maintains one of its largest foreign military bases there, with 2,900 troops and an air base. Since 2002 the French have faced a rival in the US, which maintains 1,800 military personnel in Djibouti, as well as a radio station broadcasting in Arabic. France reinforced its detachment in June 2008 with additional aircraft and a naval flotilla.

Until now the Somali pirates, who have been active for several years, have killed no one, but it is very possible that this will change after the “strong-arm” operations recently carried out by French, American and Dutch units. The French assault will only endanger the lives of future hostages taken off the Horn of Africa.

An interview published in *Lloyd’s List*, the maritime insurers’ trade magazine, summed up the pessimism and

opposition of the seafaring community in regard to such bloody manoeuvres. Jim Murphy, an expert on the Gulf of Aden region for the *Lloyd's Register-Fairplay* information service, argues that the solutions proposed—exclusion zones, military convoys, guards or armed crews—are doomed to failure, in the absence of a political resolution to the conflicts in Somalia.

Despite the unprecedented deployment of warships, the incidence of piracy and similar activities increased by nearly 200 percent between 2007 and 2008, according to the International Maritime Bureau.

Most of the media describe the Somali ports from which the pirates allegedly operate, such as Harardheere or Eyl, as “pirate dens”—thus opening up the possibility of foreign military intervention. In fact, these ports have a combined population of 32,000, only a fraction of whom is implicated in acts of piracy. An attempt to resolve the problem by military force could involve another bloodbath.

For the inhabitants of the Somali coast, the policy of the great powers has had disastrous effects. Foreign companies have dumped tons of toxic waste there and European and Asian countries exploit the fishing resources, all the while posing as defenders of the environment by reducing fishing quotas in their own waters.

More generally, the social devastation of Somalia derives from the shifting geo-politics of the major powers and the cynicism of Stalinist policy in the region. Famine has raged since the war conducted by Somalia in the Ogaden (1977-78), an ethnic Somali region but forming part of Ethiopia. During that conflict, the USSR first supported Somalia, then changed sides and supported Ethiopia. This brought about the defeat of Somalia and, in 1980, the turn toward NATO by the Somali military government of Mohammed Siad Barre and the economic intervention of the International Monetary Fund.

A series of famines in the region in the 1980s, the abandonment by Barre of Somali aims in the Ogaden, and his adoption of austerity policies imposed by the IMF undermined internal support for his regime. Barre subsequently faced a civil war against his government, led by various nationalist and ethnic groups. After Gorbachev stopped Soviet financial support for its allies in Africa, the US ended its financial support of Barre, whose regime then collapsed.

In 1992-93, the French Foreign Legion collaborated with the US invasion of Somalia, in a supposed effort to secure the country's supply of food aid, then suffering from famine. That operation ended with the withdrawal of foreign troops confronted by the resistance of the Somali people, notably in the battle around an American helicopter brought down in Mogadishu.

The current French minister of foreign affairs, Bernard Kouchner, became famous at the time through a campaign in favour of the “right to humanitarian intervention.” Images of Kouchner unloading sacks of rice were broadcast around the world. He claimed to have organized the re-supply of food for

the whole of Somalia “for two months.” What was brought in, it was later revealed, amounted to three days' consumption for the population of Mogadishu.

The right to humanitarian intervention proclaimed in 1992 merely served to justify renewed imperialist operations in the region, evoking the various justifications offered in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by the European powers to impose their will and carve up the remnants of the Ottoman Empire.

The Somali population has long lived in a state of insecurity and misery, a victim of endless imperialist machinations and conflicts between local or clan militias. Over the last ten years, the strength of Islamicist forces has grown, provoking the invasion of the country by Ethiopia in 2006, which was encouraged by the US and aided by American and allied naval forces. The international media, predictably, presented that attack as a “peace-keeping” operation.

The withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from Somalia last year, far from finally bringing peace to the Somali people, has only re-opened the question of how imperialist influence will be exercised in the country.

Powerful economic and strategic interests are at work. The Gulf of Aden is critical for international commerce, a maritime passage for most of the oil trade between Europe and the Persian Gulf and for goods traded between Asia and Europe. The Defense White Paper published in 2008 under President Nicolas Sarkozy's authority identifies this zone as representing a special strategic interest for France.

Every great power thus seizes the opportunity of a hostage-taking episode off the coast of Somalia to flex its military and political muscle. Each power also demonstrates its indifference to the fate of civilians, Somali and European, in the hope of increasing its stature in the competition among the imperialist countries.

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