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Enhancing Africa's response to transnational organised crime

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Research Paper

Stolen seas

Somalia's struggle with illegal fishing

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Summary

Somalia continues to lose an estimated US$300 million annually to illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing. Weak institutions, limited naval capacity and corrupt licensing systems have allowed foreign fleets unfettered access to its resource-rich waters. Jurisdictional disputes between federal and member state authorities compounded by external rivalries heighten mistrust and tension. This study recommends stronger monitoring and enforcement mechanisms, institutional reform and cooperative federal–member state governance to ensure transparent, sustainable management of Somalia's marine resources.

Key points

- Limited maritime forces constrain inspections and enforcement of compliance.
- Overlapping federal–member state licensing fosters malpractice and mistrust.
- Foreign fleets exploit Somali waters with little consequence.
- Middle power rivalries and separate agreements exacerbate federal–member state divisions.
- International partners have begun building capacities across maritime, fisheries and law enforcement sectors, supporting local fishing communities, though gaps remain.

Introduction

Stranded on the beach in Eyl, a town globally notorious as a piracy hub in the early 2000s in Puntland, was a small fiberglass skiff from the Chinese fleet, Liao Dong Yu 578, accused of illegal fishing. A larger vessel from this fleet was hijacked in late November 2024 and released on 13 January 2025 after payment of an unspecified ransom.[1] The vessel's licence, issued by Puntland authorities, had expired months before the hijacking. Foreign vessels fishing in Somalia's international and community-reserved waters are common, depleting marine resources and impoverishing Somali coastal communities.

A skiff belonging to the Liao Dong Yu 578 fleet on Eyl beach

Source: Authors

Somalia, the newest member of the East African Community, has Africa's longest coastline (3 033 km) and an estimated shelf area of 32 500 km².[2] The country has not had a stable government for over three decades. Civil war from 1991 to the 2000s saw the emergence of terrorist groups that have been an intractable destabilising force ever since, impeding the country's reconstruction and development.

In 1990, a year before the collapse of the Siad Barre regime, Somalia had limited naval capacity.[3] During the civil war, it collapsed entirely leaving the country's vast coastline and waters ungoverned and open, attracting illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing, piracy and other organised criminality, including illicit arms flows and human trafficking.[4, 5]

The region at the confluence of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean is one of the most marine life-rich areas along Africa's coastline.[6] The local and migratory aquatic life make it attractive for both artisanal and foreign vessels, many of whom exploit these resources. An artisanal fisherman in Bosaso, summed it up this way:

> Somalia has some of the best quality fish, lobsters and shrimps; fish are abundant here, and it is one of the richest breeding zones. The lack of a stable government to enforce appropriate regulations attracts IUU fishing operators, and the weak governance structure enables corruption to thrive and the issuance of licences without due diligence. Somalis are not a predominantly fish-eating community; hence, the sea is underutilised and not prioritised. The gap is filled by foreign actors and their demands.

IUU fishing is now deeply entrenched, with foreign actors from China, Spain, Taiwan, Japan and Iran, among others, named as responsible.[7] The country is estimated to lose about US$300 million annually,[8] while the damage to marine ecosystems is immeasurable. Added to this, and despite aid from international counterterrorism coalition partners and United Nations (UN)-backed African Union (AU) forces, Somalia has been battling jihadi insurgencies, including al-Shabaab and Islamic State affiliates since the mid-2000s.[9]

Current geopolitical developments in the Horn of Africa, and particularly in Somalia, are shaping both maritime security and efforts to counter organised crimes such as IUU fishing. Recent deals with Türkiye – one on hydrocarbon exploration and extraction, the other on maritime security – aim to strengthen Somalia's naval capabilities.[10] A tripartite alliance with Egypt and Eritrea was also signed to reinforce Somalia's sovereignty at sea. Yet an uptick in piracy and arms smuggling linked to the Houthis and al-Shabaab compounds the country's already dire maritime security challenges.[11]

This study examines how IUU fishing is evolving amid enhanced maritime cooperation, including Somalia's naval agreement with Türkiye. It explores the drivers of IUU and maritime crime, the local and foreign actors involved and their impact on coastal livelihoods. It also assesses how international cooperation can curb these crimes and where the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), federal member states (FMSs) and international partners such as the European Union (EU) can strengthen Somalia's capacity to respond.

Research methodology

This study was conducted between February and May 2025 in Puntland, a semi-autonomous FMS of Somalia, and Mogadishu, the seat of the FGS. Field research was undertaken in collaboration with Y-PEER Somalia, a civil society organisation headquartered in Garowe, the administrative capital of Puntland. YPEER is a community-based organisation, and the fieldwork was enabled in part through its network of contacts, particularly in Garowe and adjacent coastal villages. Fifty interviews and 10 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Observations and documentary analysis involving a wide range of actors in Somalia's fishing sector complemented this fieldwork.

Officials from Puntland institutions including the Ministries of Fisheries, Environment and Justice; the Puntland Maritime Police Force (PMPF); Bosaso Port; local universities; and the chamber of commerce, were interviewed. Fisherfolk, fishing company owners, local government administrators and mayors, members of fishing cooperatives and officials from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the EU Capacity Building Mission (EUCAP) were also interviewed.

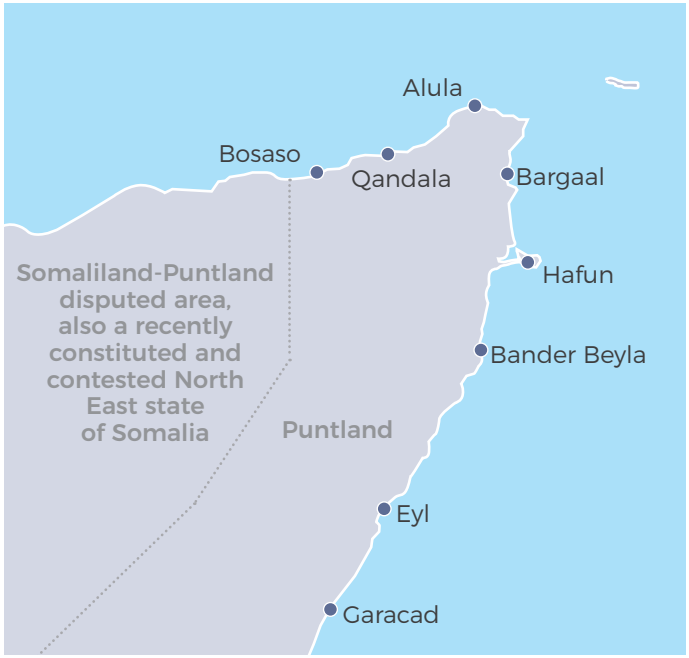
Research was conducted in Garowe and Bosaso, where most government and non-state stakeholders are based. Interviews and FGDs were also conducted in the town of Eyl and at several fish landing sites in Bosaso, engaging with fishermen, local community leaders and administrators, as well as workers from fishing companies.

In FGDs, officials, academics, police, fishing cooperatives and fishing stakeholders were interviewed. These were complemented by research from government reports, academic writings and news on IUU and related crimes. The key research question was: what is the current state of IUU fishing in Somalia, and what are the implications of emerging strategies and international collaborations for addressing it?

Chart 1: The sites visited

Source: Authors

Chart 2: Puntland showing major fish landing sites



Source: Authors

The research explored the current state of IUU in Somalia including the legal and policy frameworks. Focus was placed on understanding the drivers of IUU fishing, the actors, both foreign and local, and the nexus between piracy and IUU fishing. The many negative impacts on local communities were also explored.

To understand the existing responses to this complex challenge, current IUU fishing enforcement and surveillance, international and regional efforts in maritime cooperation, and community-based solutions were also reviewed.

Scope and limitations

This study focuses on Puntland for local insights and on the FGS in Mogadishu for federal governance and regional perspectives. The key findings and insights are not generalisable to the other FMSs though they may have similar implications across the country.

Key concepts

IUU fishing poses a significant threat to the global marine ecosystem, governance, food security and the economic stability of coastal countries. IUU fishing depletes maritime resources, undermines the livelihoods of coastal fishing communities,[12] decreases sustainable livelihoods and increases food insecurity.

It exploits weak management regimes, such as Somalia, which lack the capacity and resources for effective monitoring, control and surveillance of their fisheries as well as for enforcement of their laws and regulations. Products from IUU fishing end up in overseas markets and local food supply chains, depriving countries of origin of immeasurable resources.[13]

This study adopts the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) definition of IUU fishing. Illegal fishing refers to activities by national or foreign vessels in a state's waters without permission or in contravention of its laws. It includes vessels from states party to a regional fisheries management organisation that act contrary to its conservation and management measures or in breach of applicable national or international law.[14]

Unreported fishing refers to activities that are not reported or misreported to national authorities, in contravention of national regulations. It includes fishing within the jurisdiction of a regional fisheries management organisation that is not reported or misreported in breach of its reporting procedures.[15]

Unregulated fishing refers to activities by stateless vessels, vessels of non-member states or entities that ignore regional fisheries management measures or that occur in areas or for stocks without such measures but violate states' responsibilities under international law.[16]

Governance and impact on maritime security

Somalia has a landmass of 637 657 km^2 and an estimated population of over 18 million, with a large proportion under 30 years old. The country has been politically unstable since the collapse of the central government in 1991. Decades of civil war, terrorism, interclan strife and frequent climate crises have divested spending in education, social services and economic opportunities, exacerbating widespread unemployment, poverty and loss of livelihoods. Massive post-1991 migration, especially to Europe and North America, has created a steady flow of remittances supporting millions still in the country.

In 2004, Somalia adopted the Transitional Federal Charter and ratified the Provisional Federal Constitution in 2012.[17] The Constitution clarified key governance arrangements. Federalism was intended to disincentivise conflict, redistribute power and resources from Mogadishu[18] and foster cooperative relations between the central government and autonomous regions, such as Puntland.

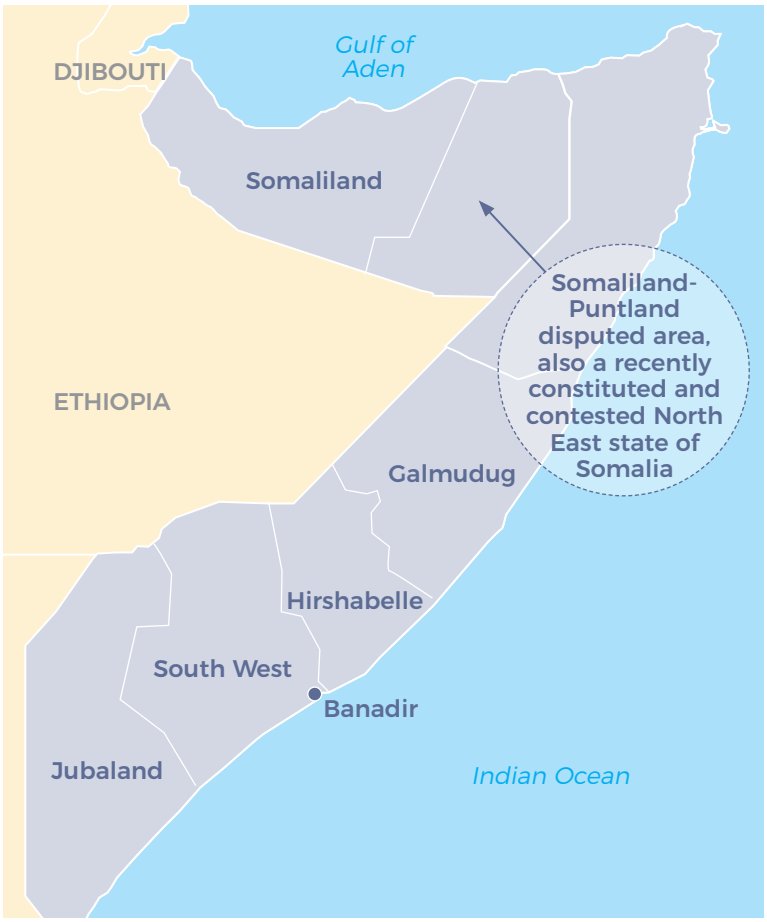
Somaliland, the northernmost region, had declared itself a sovereign state in 1991, outside the evolving federal system and without international recognition until Israel became the first country to recognise it as a sovereign state on 26 December 2026.[19] The Constitution formally recognises Jubaland, South West, Hirshabelle, Galmudug, Puntland and Somaliland and the Banadir Regional Administration as FMSs.[20] Unlike conflict-ridden south and central Somalia, Somaliland[21] and Puntland have made some progress in restoring

land and maritime security and formed their own fisheries and maritime institutions without much consultation with the rest of the country. Notably, Puntland, still part of the federation, had already adopted its own constitution and enacted fishing and maritime laws as early as 1998.[22]

SSC Khaatumo (now North Eastern State), contested by Puntland and Somaliland, is the newest FMS and remains a site of simmering conflict between unionist militias and Somaliland forces in the Sool, Sanaag and Cayn regions.

Puntland had already adopted its own constitution

Chart 3: Map of Somalia[23]



Source: Authors

The Provisional Federal Constitution, while appearing to move away from the centralisation of power, does not clearly define the distribution of power and resources or the role of the FMSs in matters of national security and foreign relations. This deficiency is at the centre of strained federal and member state relations. Somalia's federalism is also anchored in a clan-based administrative system, with inhabitants of each FMS and administrative regions being groups of related clans and sub-clans. These administrative units are a result of elite/clan bargains rather than territorial identities.[24]

Somalia relies on AU missions, regional neighbours and international partners to address security challenges and stabilise the country, which has been plagued by the al-Qaeda-affiliated al-Shabaab group since the mid-2000s.[25]

While there is some dispute as to the exact length of Somalia's coast, it is over 3 000 km. This lack of consensus on the precise length stems from ongoing maritime boundary disputes with Kenya and Yemen. The dispute between Kenya and Somalia was brought before the International Court of Justice, which delivered its judgment in October 2021, largely in Somalia's favour.[26]

Nearly a third of Somalia's coastline lies along the Gulf of Aden, with the remainder along the Indian Ocean. Its territorial waters, 12 nautical miles (nm), and a 200 nm Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) under the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) cover an estimated 830 390 km,^{2} almost 200 000 km^2 larger than its land area.[27] For a country dealing with persistent internal conflict and terrorism, this extensive coastline is almost impossible to monitor. In this context, IUU fishing has flourished.

Added to this, is the maritime enforcement and compliance quagmire, arising from contestation over resource sharing between the FGS and FMSs. The problem stems from constitutional ambiguity and a lack of consensus on federalism, including the formation of FMSs, border demarcations, the status of Mogadishu and fiscal federalism, particularly in relation to marine resource sharing.

This clash between the federal government and some of the FMSs has weakened the already fragile legal and policy frameworks. It further compounds a difficult problem and taints responses.

Governance of the semi-autonomous Puntland

During the 1990s civil war in southern and central Somalia, the relatively peaceful north-eastern region established Puntland State on 1 August 1998. While recognising Somalia's federal unity, Puntland operates as a semi-autonomous region, managing its own elections, ministries, ports, airports and security forces. It engages directly with foreign countries, attracts investments, maintains bilateral relations with development partners and runs its economy independently of the federal government. In practice, Puntland functions as an independent state within Somalia's federal structure, exercising significant political, economic and security autonomy while formally remaining part of the country.

With nearly 1 400 km of coastline, Puntland is the crown jewel of Somali marine resources

Puntland has been fiercely protective of its resources, including fisheries and marine resources. Hence, the fisheries law in the state should be viewed from the perspective of a relatively stable region, wary of the loss of its semi-autonomous administration of its resource-rich land and waters. With nearly 1 400 km of coastline, it is the crown jewel of Somali marine resources, rich in both native and migratory marine species and strategically located at the confluence of the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, one of the busiest maritime shipping routes. These features make the Puntland waters attractive to IUU fishing and piracy. A senior government official said, 'We shall abide by our own laws and protect our land and seas from authoritarian and exploitative federal government until an amicable resource-sharing mechanism is agreed upon.'[28]

The Puntland fisheries law discusses administration, registration, licensing provisions, offences and penalties, administrative resolutions and regulations. The regulations authorise its Ministry of Fisheries to issue national and foreign licences, manage all aspects of its fisheries sector and establish partnerships with other states and international organisations for fishing access agreements. It classifies its waters as such: Puntland State of Somalia waters of up to 12 nm, contiguous zone of up to 24 nm and EEZ up to 200 nm as defined by the UNCLOS of 1982.[29]

The Puntland Ministry of Fisheries, with partners such as the FAO, UNODC and EU agencies has trained officials, the criminal justice chain, local fishermen and other stakeholders, supported policy development and established fishing facilities, pirate prisons and offices. However, due to the lengthy

stretch of the coastline and its limited maritime forces, the Puntland authorities have barely managed to ensure compliance.

Factors contributing to IUU fishing and related maritime crimes

Given Somalia's instability and fragility, several factors contribute to the coastal and maritime insecurity. IUU fishing has thrived amid the weak governance of its extensive EEZ, the devolved, often conflictual federal structures and the actions of FMSs, FGS officials and other non-state entities.

With one of Somalia's longest coastlines, Puntland is heavily affected by illegal fishing, piracy and associated organised crime. Data is scant on the exact value of the loss due to IUU fishing in Somalia, although 2025 estimates of US$300 million annual loss of revenue are often cited.[30]

An earlier 2022 Stable Seas report highlights that the Somali region is experiencing the severe effects of unchecked illegal fishing; about US$450 million is lost each year to IUU fishing within the Somali EEZ. It notes that foreign vessels target highly migratory species in deeper waters and trawl along the coast, especially in Puntland's north-eastern area. Based on automatic identification system tracking, satellite imagery and radar images, the report states that at least 200 Iranian-flagged vessels engaged in illegal fishing in the Somali EEZ during the 2019–2020 season.[31]

Without accurate data over time, assessing the scope and scale of the loss and responding strategically are limited. Two factors contribute to the lack of reliable, accurate data. First, the country does not record the local fish catch and output. Linked to this, it lacks the capacity to determine the catch volume by licensed (or unlicensed foreign vessels) out of its EEZ. Hence, the estimates in circulation could be a modest figure of a much bigger problem.

Due to the vastness of the EEZ and the country's inability to monitor all fishing vessels within it, respondents, including those from the ministries of fisheries, noted many illegal vessels operated without tracking, violating maritime and fishing laws.[32] Better equipped than artisanal Somali fishermen, these foreign vessels are accused of depleting the fish stock. Jama, a respondent in Eyl, described the situation, 'They have larger vessels and can sweep the oceans, even outside the recommended fishing peak season, taking what they want and discarding bycatch overboard. They leave nothing for us.'

Better equiped than artisinal Somali fishermen, foreign vessels are accused of depleting fish stock

In response to the massive looting of marine resources, artisanal fishermen turned to piracy, disrupting major shipping routes in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean, through which nearly a third of global trade passes. This disruption prompted the UN Security Council to adopt a special resolution on piracy, leading to EU and international naval deployments that curbed the practice by 2011.

However, these responses failed to address predatory IUU fishing. Some former pirates argued that they were merely protecting Somalia's waters, claiming, 'The pirates are the only ones who can handle and deal with IUU fishing – they chased the foreigners and their vessels away.'[33]

Despite efforts to stop piracy disrupting global maritime trade, respondents said similar attention has not been given to IUU fishing. One former Somali anti-piracy chief observed:

> International cooperation is lacking. The large naval forces, such as EU NAVFOR [EU Naval Force], are not interested in sharing information with us regarding illegal fishing. They are only interested in the pirates. They are here for their interests and to protect fishing vessels from their own countries.[34]

The majority of FMSs control their parts of EEZs and unilaterally issue local and foreign fishing licences without consulting or coordinating with the federal government. For most federal members, their quota of the sea and its marine resources and opportunities are their own and something that the federal government has no stake in. Several forums held to deliberate on the thorny question of resource sharing have not provided an amicable solution.

The resultant duplication of licences and jurisprudential overlaps, compounded by the apparent absence of federal maritime security enforcement and compliance agencies in most parts of the country, threaten sustainable security. The ongoing disputes between the federal and member state governments regarding the authority to issue fishing licences have led to confusion and gaps that allow illegal operators to exploit the system.

Limited capacity to inspect and track licensed vessels means federal authorities, FMS licensing departments and local administrations face a high risk of these vessels engaging in irresponsible and environmentally damaging fishing practices. They also have limited capacity to enforce compliance with fishing laws, deter illegal fishing and ensure that vessels report to local ports to measure the tonnage of catches and the types of fish.

The perception of IUU fishing varies depending on who is asking the question

For a clear picture of the extent of IUU fishing, one must discern what, according to local fishermen and government officials, constitutes IUU fishing. The perception of IUU fishing varies depending on who is asked the question. Many fishermen believe foreign vessels have no business being in their national waters and are engaged in illegal fishing, regardless of whether they are licensed. Although knowledge of the licensing of foreign vessels in Somali waters is growing, the tendency to blame such vessels for the scarcity of fish for local fisherfolk remains widespread.

'What we have here in Puntland is not illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing but legal, unregulated and unreported fishing,' said Abdullahi, an independent researcher in Garowe.[35] He explained that the phenomenon reflects irresponsible and unsustainable fishing practices by foreign – and, to some extent, local – vessels operating with inadequate restraint.

A further factor contributing to IUU fishing is corruption within the federal government and federal member structures and among officials of various fishing and maritime affairs. Several respondents said that officials in these ministries sometimes engage in corrupt practices, such as issuing licences to known illegal fishing vessels, acting as proxies for foreign fishing companies and accepting hefty bribes to let vessels remain in Somali waters even after their licences have expired.[36] Some officials are mentioned as having stakes in the fishing sector themselves, indicating a potential conflict of interest in the industry they are expected to guide. They also make no effort to deter IUU fishing through legally established compliance measures, such as onboard inspections.

The absence of effective governance in Somalia, coupled with the dire economic circumstances and the unchecked exploitation of marine resources by foreign actors, continues to fuel IUU fishing and other maritime crimes. Addressing these issues requires stronger governance, economic investment, enhanced maritime security and sustained international collaboration.

Overlapping jurisdictions and resource disputes between federal and Puntland authorities

As already mentioned, overlapping jurisdictions are both a contributing factor to IUU fishing and a stumbling block to prevent and disrupt it. Semi-autonomous states such as Puntland and Somaliland have developed and apply their own laws and regulations, resulting in a lack of uniformity and complicating management efforts. Enforcing existing laws is consequently equally challenging.[37]

Given legal ambiguities and unresolved resource sharing between the FGS and FMSs, it is worth outlining several key international marine treaties Somalia is party to at the federal level, along with the attendant challenges posed by jurisprudential overlap.

- The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS, 1982) ratified by Somalia in 1989, grants the country sovereign rights over a 200 nm EEZ and its marine resources.[38] However the FGS's authority is limited, as Puntland and Somaliland manage their waters independently, undermining federal control over Somali waters.

- The Port State Measures Agreement (2009), ratified in 2015, aims to combat IUU fishing by inspecting foreign vessels in Somali ports and blocking illegally caught fish from entering markets,[39] but weak FGS enforcement limits its implementation.
- The Nairobi Convention, signed by Somalia and other East African states, promotes joint action by governments, civil society and the private sector for the sustainable management of the region's marine and coastal environment.[40]
- The Protocol on Regional Co-operation in Combating Pollution (1982), which Somalia signed under the Regional Convention for the Conservation of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Environment, addresses oil and chemical pollution emergencies.[41]
- The Indian Ocean Tuna Commission, which Somalia joined in 2011, promotes cooperation for the conservation and sustainable use of tuna and tuna-like species.[42] It has 31 members.[43]

Reviewing national, federal law, similar issues of overlap, confused or obstructive mandates are apparent. Using the Fisheries Law of the Federal Republic of Somalia, 2016, as the main legal instrument for all matters of fisheries and marine resources, this section details the overlap challenge between federal and member state frameworks. The Fisheries Law of 2016 is a repeal of Law No. 23 of November 1985.

The law states:

> [The federal] Ministry of Fisheries shall consult wherever feasible with governments, fisheries administrations, authorities of other states in the region and in particular, with those sharing the same or related stocks with a view of harmonising and improving fisheries management in the region as a whole.[44]

It establishes specific fishing zones for Somali and foreign-licensed vehicles setting out that Somali fishermen may operate within 12 nm, while licensed foreign vessels may fish between 24 and 200 nm in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea. Only coastal fishermen are permitted to fish within 24 nm.[45] The federal authority manages the EEZ.[46]

The application of the law at the operational level reveals practical challenges. Foreign vessels have often operated freely within artisanal fishing zones, depleting local marine resources. No harmonisation between federal and member state frameworks has been undertaken. Some FMSs, such as Puntland, exclusively apply their own fisheries and maritime laws.

Somali fishermen may operate within 12 nm, while licensed foreign vessels may fish between 24 and 200 nm in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea

The law authorises the federal ministry to issue all fishing licences to vessels operating in Somali waters, while considering the regional states in which the vessels are operating. It is unclear what that consideration constitutes. The situation on the ground is that for semi-autonomous member states like Puntland and the breakaway republic of Somaliland, they manage their side of Somali waters and issue licences at the state and sub-regional levels.[47]

One key provision, the acceptance of fishing agreement and the issuing of foreign licences, addresses the ambiguity around foreign fishing rights and licensing. The federal ministry may consult and sign agreements with other governments or international organisations.[48] Using this authority, it has signed deals with countries such as Türkiye[49] on fisheries and maritime security and China[50] on fishing rights. However, FMSs argue that these agreements were made without proper consultation with them.

A second provision states that 'all fishing licences issued by regional administrations or subsequent interim governments between January 1991 and before the ratification of this Somalia fisheries law, shall be invalid with effect from the date this law comes into force.'[51] This, in effect, declares all current licensing issued by the member states invalid. Member states have been ignoring these provisions pending the

conclusion of the Federal Constitution and resource-sharing formula between the federal government and the member states.[52]

However, the provision above is contradicted by the explicit mention in Article 23 of this law that the federal government must consult regional governments before issuing fishing licences and coordinate revenue sharing until a specific law is established. However, political infighting and mistrust have prevented these consultations. As Ali, a Bosaso fisheries officer explained, 'The federal government forces or their international partners cannot dare operate in the federal member state waters. We manage our side of the water, they manage theirs – it's that simple.'[53]

The federal fisheries law sets rules for vessel inspection, offences and penalties, fishing gear and methods, protection of marine life and habitats and measures to prevent sea pollution.

The law, while comprehensive, faces a stark reality: the limited capability of the federal authority to implement the measures it sets out. The strained relations between the different levels of governance clip the overall ability of the federal government to exercise its powers over Somali waters. As Ibrahim (not his real name), an official at an international organisation, aptly put it:

> The federal government has laws on fishing and maritime issues, but it is barely paperwork. It lacks a working navy and coastguard and [only has] a few patrol boats. It is a toothless maritime authority. If the federal government cannot protect the land, how do we expect them to protect the sea?

Most of Somalia's fishing laws are still in the process of finalisation, noted a senior federal government police officer and some obstacles hinder their enforcement. 'There is no system in place to track the size and movements of fishing vessels,' said the officer. Somalia is also yet to finalise laws on the Shipping Code, draft a Coast Guard Act and put into effect the Federal Somali Fisheries Authority.[54] The country's fishing issues are outlined in its annual and five-year plans, but these are barely implemented due to resource scarcity and limited capacity. The federal government periodically introduces new fishing regulations,[55, 56] but Puntland authorities have contested previous attempts to issue nationwide regulations.[57]

Annual and five-year plans are barely implemented due to resource scarcity and limited capacity

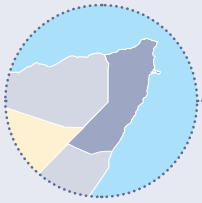
A 2024 fisheries initiative worth mentioning, driven by the FGS, is the Somali Sustainable Fisheries Development Project, also known locally as the 'Badmaal Project', a US$55 million grant from the World Bank's International Development Association. This initiative is a significant effort to improve the country's fisheries management through the Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy and is expected to enhance the capacity of its coastal communities.[58] However, it has not received the necessary support from FMSs like Puntland due to strained relations.

In Puntland, fisheries law largely mirrors the 1985 Somali Fisheries Law No. 23, adapted locally in 2006, a decade before the current federal law. Puntland has not adopted or referred to the federal law as its version predates the federal government.[59] At the time, the country was under transitional authorities, dealing with civil war, the Islamic Court Union and the rise of al-Shabaab.

IUU fishing in Somalia: vulnerable actors, crafty enablers and enduring harms

This section, based on primary data from Puntland and Mogadishu, examines key local and foreign actors perpetuating IUU fishing and how the inaction of other state and non-state players worsens the problem. It also interrogates the impact of IUU fishing on coastal livelihoods, marine ecosystems and related illicit markets. Somalia's fishing sector has diverse stakeholders, including state and non-state actors, local and foreign artisanal operators, international organisations and naval forces.

Chart 4: Influential stakeholders in Puntland



1 Somali stakeholders

- Artisanal fishing communities and individual fishermen
- Fishing companies
- Chamber of commerce
- Local fish sellers and exporters
- Processors of fish products (e.g., gulper shark liver oil)
- Merchants selling fishing gear and vessels
- Commercial banks and financial institutions providing loans for fishing gear

2 Foreign stakeholders

- Licensed and unlicensed foreign fishing operators
- Local partners, licence brokers and intermediaries of the foreign operators

3 FMS Puntland government agencies

- Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources
- Ministry of Ports
- Ministry of Environment
- Ministry of Justice and Religious Affairs
- PMPF
- Port police

4 FGS agencies based in Mogadishu

- The federal presidency
- Ministries of Fisheries, Ports, Justice, Finance, Environment and Foreign Affairs
- Federal security agencies and forces
- International partners supporting federal ministries and departments
- Friendly countries and international partners investing in maritime security and fisheries (e.g., Türkiye)

5 International agencies and bodies

- UN: FAO, UNODC
- AU Transition Mission in Somalia
- EU: EUCAP, Operation Atalanta
- Individual countries: United States (US), the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Türkiye, Qatar and the Regional Economic Community – Intergovernmental Authority on Development

Source: Authors

Local Somali stakeholders influence IUU fishing in diverse ways, both positively and negatively.

The ancient port town of Eyl with its picturesque sandy beach is home to a desolate collection of shanty shops and houses that pass as its centre. The desolation conceals painful memories of a once thriving hub with abundant fish stock. Fishermen could sustain their families on their daily catch without venturing far from the shore. Now with their livelihoods threatened by steadily declining fish yields and few alternative income options, many in these and similar fishing communities have left or become impoverished and trapped in debt.

Fishing equipment is prohibitively expensive for many fishermen, who often lack the resources to buy boats, nets and oxygen gear. Costly gear, mostly acquired through loans, gathers dust as daily forays into the ocean do not bring them the needed catch and income.[60] At times, their equipment and catches are confiscated by operators of advanced foreign vessels, whether licensed or illegal. The mayor of Eyl remarked:

> The fishermen have to get the equipment on loans or use their limited savings to buy them and after they are taken from them, they get into debt as they replace what is taken. If it is forcefully taken from them, they can't go to the same stores for another loan. They then resort to using their hands and spears.

Many respondents report frequent sightings of foreign vessels near the shore, within the 24 nm reserved for local fishers.[61, 62] Respondents added they cannot compete with the sophisticated equipment and skilled labour of massive foreign vessels that exploit Somalia's limited regulatory capacity.

Encounters between foreign vessels and local fishing skiffs are violent, including unprovoked attacks, attempts to destroy small vessels and being shot at, often by hired Somali security guards on these foreign vessels.[63] Local communities have no recourse as they are unsure to whom these violations should be reported. 'The troubles occur when the locals ask for their catch and confiscated equipment [to be returned] and would end with the local being shot by "another local" on the foreign vessel,' explained Hassan, a fisherman from Bosaso.[64] Foreign vessels claim these attacks are precautionary measures to avert piracy.[65]

A skiff being pushed into the sea in preparation for lobster shipping, in Eyl

Source: Authors

A dilapidated fish-processing facility in Nagfish, Bosaso

Source: Authors

FGD respondents in Eyl said local fishermen are often accused of being pirates when they are near foreign ships. Respondents also reported that some foreign vessel operators take their fish and nets and destroy their boats. These altercations happen on the high seas, where Puntland's limited maritime security capacity leaves artisanal fishermen without protection, fuelling resentment and, for some, encouraging piracy as the only defence.[66]

The purchasing power of local communities, especially at smaller landing sites, is incredibly low; ironically, it is reported that this pushes the same artisanal fishermen to sell their catches to operators of foreign vessels. The transshipment practice, though not discussed openly, is widespread along the Puntland coastline. Respondents in Bosaso reported that the prices they receive for selling fish to foreign vessels on the high seas are slightly higher than those at the local landing sites. 'There is no local demand for the fish we catch. So, we sell to the foreigners at throwaway prices of less than the US$3–4 we could get at the landing sites,' a fisherman said.[67]

A fisherman removes tuna from an ice-filled storage tank in Nagfish, Bosaso. Hygiene practices are poor

Source: Authors

This is corroborated by an earlier research report from 2015,[68] which reveals that in Somalia overall, the most frequent sales point for fish is within local communities (46%), while 35% sell to other boats at sea, reportedly operated by Yemeni traders. Only 19% sell in other communities. In Puntland, 65% of local fishermen reportedly sell to boats at sea.[69] Such at-sea transfers of catch result in revenue loss for Somali authorities, as foreign vessels do not register these catches as originating from Somali waters.[70] Scarcity of data complicates the ability to discern the extent of the illegal transhipment of marine products to countries like Yemen, despite the claims of its rampancy as respondents observe.

Declining fish stock, coupled with the lack of alternative livelihoods, has increasingly adverse social and health impacts on artisanal fishing communities. Respondents report that suicide rates have increased due to desperation. A contributing factor could be that the near collapse of sea-dependent livelihoods has led to such levels of despair that people see no other option.

For crustacean fishermen, the lack of proper diving gear has driven many to use improvised underwater breathing devices called 'honug'. Between February 2024 and January 2025, these devices are reported to have caused over 20 deaths[71] in Eyl.[72] The actual figure could be higher, as many artisanal fishermen use similar devices with fatal results. Honug allow divers to exceed recommended depths, exposing them to nitrogen narcosis, which can damage the nervous system, cause paralysis and ultimately lead to death.[73]

Illegal fishing and the depletion of fish stocks is affecting the demographics of fishing communities forcing many impoverished fishermen to move to larger towns, abandoning once-lucrative enclaves.

Convergence of transnational organised crime along the coast

Dwindling fish stocks and limited opportunities encourage the growth of illicit economic activities. In an environment with limited government capacity to enforce regulations, these opportunistic activities thrive.

Targeted fishing of endangered gulper sharks, combined with clandestine processing and export cartels in cities such as Bosaso involving local businessmen, clan leaders, officials and foreign actors, threatens the species with extinction in Somali waters.[74]

Young men from fishing communities are increasingly drawn into intricate transnational human trafficking networks, promising jobs in the Gulf and beyond, through a practice called *tahriib*.[75]

Displaced former fishermen often become part of the urban poor, eking out a living through informal work in cities such as Garowe, Bosaso and Garaad. The deserted landing sites are becoming hotspots for cartels engaging in arms[76] and commodity smuggling and contraband. Terrorist groups such as the Islamic State–Somalia and al-Shabaab use these sites to import weapons,[77] exploiting smuggling networks that co-opt former fishermen and their vessels.[78]

Resilience amid challenges: struggles of local fishing companies

For privately owned fishing companies, the impact of illegal fishing affects their operational bottom line. Aside from the limited fish available for processing, they are unable to outcompete international fishing companies. For foreign vessels, there are no requirements for labelling their catches as Somali fish products. Once caught, most fish are processed onboard in advanced plants that can stay at sea for months, then sold as products of the vessel's home country.

For local Somali fishing companies, access to international markets is a pipe dream. There are no internationally accepted global standards within the country. Hence, exports to foreign markets remain unavailable. To circumvent the challenge, local companies engage in transshipment. While transshipment generates much-needed capital and allows local fishing companies to remain operational, it also results in revenue losses due to low fish prices and regulatory actions by Somali authorities.[79]

Visits to fishing companies reveal struggles with high electricity and operational costs, poor roads, limited cold storage and ice, high post-harvest losses, lack of financial support and outdated fishing technologies.[80] These companies' primary markets are the major towns in Somalia and Ethiopia. To meet the growing demand for fish in cities across Somalia, they have developed a steady supply chain that sources fish at favourable prices from Somali artisanal fishermen.

These local companies create valuable employment opportunities. One company owner who is a Somali investor from the diaspora said that, unlike some foreign-operated companies, his plant accepts even damaged fish. Interestingly, he revealed that at one time, the young men arrested on the high seas for piracy were his suppliers. He said this was common out of fishing season or when local stocks were depleted by IUU fishing.

Shrimps awaiting packaging for export at a Chinese-operated factory in Eyl, Puntland

Source: Authors

The employment opportunities that local companies offer to fishing communities could help address economic vulnerabilities that predispose unemployed and underemployed fishers to engage in piracy and other organised criminal activities. In this regard, the growing role of Somalia-based and diasporic investments in the fisheries hold immense potential.

Most fishing companies are Somali-owned, but one notable example of a transnational collaboration is a Chinese-operated Somali-owned crustacean processing company in Eyl. The mid-sized company, established in 2017, employs about 15 people at US$250 a month.

It buys lobsters and shrimps from local fishermen, stores them in cold facilities, then transports them via Garowe to China. Employment, however, is seasonal, peaking from October to February. Between March and September, like other crustacean fisherfolk, company employees take on odd jobs, such as masonry, livestock keeping and petty trade, which often lead them into smuggling networks and piracy.

The real extent of IUU fishing is obscured by a lack of reliable data from both federal and member state authorities. A 2015 report noted that about 87% of fishermen said there were currently no reporting requirements for fish, and 95% stated that, until recently, there had been no such requirements either.[81]

For instance, Puntland's daily landings of 119 kg per fisherman, over 142 fishing days and 6 500 fishermen amount to about 110 000 tonnes annually. This is more than the usually quoted figure of fish landed in the whole of Somalia. There is reason to believe that under-reporting of local landings is high. This is a challenge to most developing nations and particularly to countries like Somalia that have extensive coastlines and many small landing sites.[82]

Foreign stakeholders and enablers

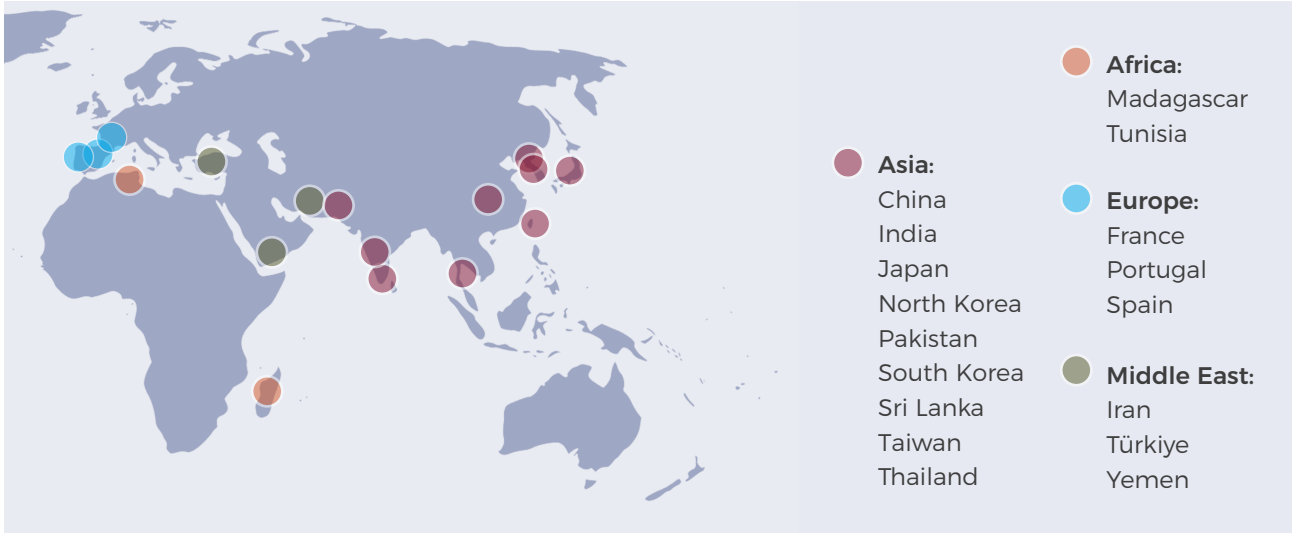
In early October 2025, Puntland authorities cracked down on foreign vessels suspected to be operating illegally without valid fishing licences. Several Yemeni and Iranian vessels were seized and their crew brought before courts to answer to charges of engaging in IUU fishing.[83] Such actions, though few and far between, are just the tip of the iceberg that Somali authorities are struggling to curb.

Foreign stakeholders include operators of licensed and unlicensed vessels. In their fishing activities, they are enabled by local partners, licence brokers and intermediaries who offer them various services and are complicit in some cases in the illegal fishing activities, attacks against Somali artisanal fishermen and the protection of foreign vessels as hired security personnel.

During the field visits, the research team did not interact directly with foreign fishing vessel operators and much of the data provided here is derived from oral accounts of local respondents in Puntland and in Mogadishu and secondary materials.

Identifying foreign vessels is challenging for local fishing communities. This information could be useful if they were to report vessels that engage in illegal fishing. 'The people have a low understanding of flags, but now they can describe the colours and shapes,' remarked a reporter.[84] Over time, frequent encounters have helped artisanal fishermen recognise vessels though they cannot reliably tell if these vessels are licensed.

Chart 5: Source countries of reported IUU fishing vessels[85]



Source: Authors

The respondents also reported the following observations concerning these foreign vessels:

- That Yemeni and Iranian vessels, though licensed, do not operate in good faith.[86] Respondents mention that vessels from the two countries are implicated in several illegal fishing incidents in Puntland waters.
- That Yemenis use small ports and often use local company licences.[87] Yemen has long historical connections to the Somali coast. Their proximity and connection have granted them unofficial and freer access to the Somali coast along the Red Sea and Somali upper western Indian Ocean coast.
- That France and Spain use Madagascar as the processing zone for their fishing catches. The respondents sharing these claims argue that such processing and transshipment robs the country of revenue that surpasses the value of the licensing fees the federal or member states collect.
- That the EU and China use their naval forces to protect their vessels. The local respondents question the legality and usefulness of big powers, which appear to protect their licensed vessels and curb piracy but do nothing to address rampant IUU fishing.[88]
- That there is a noticeable growing presence of Turkish vessels to protect their oil ships and fishing vessels.[89] Türkiye has become one of the FGS's strongest foreign partners over the past two decades, with investments spanning from fisheries and marine resources to hydrocarbon exploitation, management of the federal airport, main seaport and major infrastructure. Its support also extends to maritime security, counterterrorism and capacity building of federal security forces and even the building of space industry facilities.[90]
- That some foreign vessels employ Somalis, often from the clans along the coast, allowing them to fish in local waters with impunity.[91] This raises the complicity and agency of local actors in providing armed escort support and collaborating with foreign vessels, as noted by several respondents.
- That some foreign vessels operate under Somali agency names and even have lawyers on board to avoid prosecution for IUU fishing. Such dubious practices, respondents argue, not only lead to loss of revenue but add to the endurance of illegal fishing in Somali waters.[92]
- That some vessels fish within 12 nm at night, sweeping local artisanal fishing community quotas regularly. These sightings are said to be common in coastal areas such as Eyl and Garaad.[93]

Some foreign vessels are enormous and can fish for months on the high seas

Several respondents report that some foreign vessels, including European ones, are enormous, use heavy nets and can fish for months on the high seas, onboard processing for international markets. A fisherman at Nagfish landing point lamented that their high-tech equipment, unavailable to locals, gives them an unfair advantage, resulting in consistently low catches for Somali fishermen. 'They have taken our seas and the government knows,' said Abdishakur Nur Jamac.[94]

In addition, respondents noted that some foreign vessels, particularly Iranian ones, use luminous devices at night to attract and harvest large volumes of fish, an illegal practice under both federal and Puntland regulations. This excessive fishing depletes stocks, affecting local livelihoods.[95] The mayor of Eyl noted, '2024 has been the worst year on record for Eyl, the reason being overfishing by foreign vessels, some of which have legal licences but engage in taking excess beyond their agreed quota.'

A common practice observed by local fishing communities is nocturnal fishing by foreign vessels. 'The vessels hide during the day and work at night; light is visible,' said Mohamed Said Waberi, a former fisher. 'The big vessels do not respect the nautical miles regulation, and they fish close to the shores at night. We have no government to surveil and take action against them.'

Some foreign vessels are also known to employ destructive fishing methods at night, such as dynamite fishing and bottom trawling, which severely damage marine ecosystems, including the sea floor and coral reefs and further deplete stocks.[96] The bombing of the sea floor and stomping the ground creates noise to scare the fish, making them easier to catch indiscriminately.[97]

Fraudulent licensing and IUU fishing

This contestation between the federal and state governments allows for irregularity in the issuance of licences to flourish. A foreign vessel may obtain a Puntland licence in addition to a federal one, thereby incurring high operating costs due to double payment. To recover its costs, such a vessel may engage in IUU fishing.

Respondents observed that the most significant challenges to curbing IUU fishing are fraud and corruption in the issuance of fishing licences.[98] In the case of Puntland, foreigners obtain licences from both the FGS's Fisheries Ministry and Puntland's Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources. Some foreign and local Somali vessels are required to obtain them from the mayors of coastal towns and territories.

The most significant challenges are fraud and corruption in the issuance of fishing licences

Notable gaps and loopholes in licensing identified by respondents that allow IUU fishing to flourish include:

- **Duplication of licences:** a single issued licence duplicated and used by several vessels bearing the same name and appearance
- **Falsifying fish species in licensing:** falsely stating one type of fish species on the licences but engaging in illegal fishing of other more lucrative marine species such as lobsters and shrimps
- **Co-opting locals with incentives:** foreign vessels incentivising local enablers and licensing authority officials with bribes, jobs for relatives and shares in their profits to get access to licences; this allows them to engage in irresponsible fishing practices
- **Clan and political elites as interested facilitators of corruption:** coastal clan elders and politicians cited as intermediaries in the issuance of foreign vessel licences, often with personal stakes or hefty bribes[99]
- **Transfer of local licences to foreign vessels:** local licence holders transferring their rights to foreign operators, concealing ownership and enabling overfishing
- **Fabrication of licences:** overlapping and duplicate licences issued by different levels of government, with some forged or obtained through corruption, leading to overfishing and jurisdictional conflicts
- **Use of middlemen to obtain legal documentation:** Somali brokers, especially in Yemen, facilitating licence acquisition for a cut, revealing a transnational network of corrupt intermediaries
- **Operation without valid permits:** many instances of local fishing vessels operating without licences or with expired permits

Emergent licensing patterns show that Yemenis are issued licences by Puntland's Ministry of Fisheries through local mayors, possibly due to close regional ties, for US$200. Yemeni and Iranian vessels are reportedly most notorious for IUU fishing on the Puntland coast.

Other foreign vessels also obtain licences through Puntland's Ministry of Fisheries and via mayors who collect the same facilitation fees. The mayors issue local fishermen licences at the same rate. This highlights the crucial role of coastal town mayors in licensing and fee collection.

The conditions for the licensing of foreign vessels are procedural and time bound. A typical contract between the vessels and the Ministry of Fisheries is tightly scheduled over agreed-upon durational periods, spanning days, weeks or months. Before the vessel proceeds, the owner must deposit a non-refundable fee of US$1 million for each month the vessel remains in Somali waters. Whether the owner succeeds in recouping the costs is not of concern to the authorities.[100] This encourages IUU fishing to recover costs.

Somali artisanal fishermen also accuse major naval powers, such as the EU and China, of protecting their fishing vessels from piracy. There is also a growing presence of Turkish oil tankers and fishing vessels. Türkiye has, over the last decade and a half, emerged as the strongest ally and most significant investor in FGS security, maritime and infrastructural development.[101]

These different levels of government issue licences with inadequate coordination. As mentioned earlier, while the federal government issues fishing licences to foreign vessels, so do Puntland and other member states. The member states also allow local administrations along the coast to issue licences to artisanal fishing vessels.

The issuing authorities cannot enforce vessel reporting for catch inspection and verification, nor ensure they leave Somali waters after their fishing seasons, due to limited manpower and the scarcity of inspection vessels. The authorities rely on the goodwill of fishing vessels to adhere to their licences – to take only what they are authorised to fish from Somali waters and then leave. Many foreign vessels fail to uphold this principle of good faith, knowing they can get away with violating the rules.[102] This is corroborated by respondents who observed that, due to a lack of adequate inspection personnel and vessels, some foreign vessels overstay their licensing period.[103]

The overlap in licensing raises the question: who ultimately controls Somali waters? Unresolved disputes over resource distribution compel states, such as Puntland, to assert authority over their waters independently. Distrust of the federal government due to centralisation, constitutional breaches and authoritarian tendencies has fuelled 'resource nationalism' among member states with stable systems. A government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, remarked:

> This is our sea. We made our constitution way before the federal government was even formed. We do not require the FGS to manage our resources. They are corrupt. We have been issuing licences for a long time and will continue to do so. We have the longest stretch of the Somalia coastline, and we have managed it well for years.

Return of piracy? Nexus of IUU fishing and piracy

Between 2008 and 2012, piracy attacks off the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean reached their peak.[104] Somalia became the global epicentre of piracy. It took the intervention of the international community and national anti-piracy initiatives to curb it.[105] Coastal towns such as Eyl, Hobyo and Harardhere became launching pads for the attacks, which numbered in the hundreds and included many kidnappings of crews for ransom. It is estimated that a nascent piracy economy generated millions of US dollars, fuelling a local real estate boom, investment in the coastal towns and clan business networks. The financiers and pirates shared the ransom on a 30–70 basis.[106]

The UN Security Council passed Resolutions 1814, 1816, 1838 and 1846 to mobilise global naval forces against piracy disrupting trade through the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. This unprecedented collaboration, led by missions such as Operation Atalanta (formally EU NAVFOR) and Combined Task Force 151 significantly reduced attacks. Naval forces responded quickly to distress calls, apprehended suspects and handed them over to Somali, Kenyan and Seychellois authorities for prosecution, leading to a major decline in piracy incidents.[107]

Most piracy suspects apprehended are young artisanal fishermen

Pirates and sections of local communities often cite the depletion of fish stock by foreign IUU fishing in their waters as the primary motivating factor for the attacks. Most suspects apprehended are young artisanal fishermen who, dissatisfied with their meagre income, try their luck in taking over ships and demanding ransoms.[108]

To further build the capacities of Somali federal and member state authorities, the UNODC, EU and other international partners supported the training of criminal justice system actors and the construction of prisons. A notable example is the UNODC-built prison complex in Garowe, which can hold over 500 inmates. Among the currently incarcerated are convicted pirates and illegal fishermen from Somalia, Yemen, Mauritius and Kenya. The prisoners are given vocational training to enhance their skills. The maximum sentence for piracy is 24 years. Puntland's presidential pardon periodically releases former Somali pirates serving lengthy sentences.[109]

The increase in piracy since December 2024 is raising concerns about a resurgence. In 2024, a Chinese vessel with 18 crew members on board was hijacked near Xaafuun district off the north-east coast of Puntland. The guards on board colluded with armed pirates to hijack the vessel, which was fishing without valid authorisation as its licence, issued in 2020, had expired. A respondent suggested that although the vessel was Chinese-owned, it was Somali-operated, indicating collaboration between foreign and Somali operatives in IUU fishing. The hijackers demanded US$10 million.[110] After a seven-week ordeal, the vessel was released in early January 2025. It was not revealed whether the ransom was paid.[111] The pirates involved in this hijacking were captured and are currently held in Garowe prison awaiting trial.[112] A former anti-piracy body head said:

> Piracy is seen as an international problem and IUU fishing is a Somali problem. When there is a spike in piracy, due to the critical position Somalia occupies close to major international maritime routes, everybody panics and deploys forces to curb it. With IUU fishing, only a few care. We have learnt just to live with this perpetual problem.[113]

Three Yemeni-flagged vessels were hijacked off the coast of Puntland in February and March 2025. The first incident occurred on 10 February off the coast of Eyl, but the vessel and its 12 crew members were rescued on 13 February with the help of Operation Atalanta.[114] A second vessel was hijacked by pirates on 17 February, again off the coast of Eyl,[115] and abandoned on 22 February.[116] The third vessel was hijacked on 16 March 2025, off the coast of Durdura near Eyl.[117]

Piracy is seen as an international problem and IUU fishing is a Somali problem

According to a local Puntland government official, a pattern is emerging. Pirates identify and hijack smaller Yemeni fishing vessels and use them to hijack medium-sized Iranian fishing vessels. Then they use the Iranian ones to hijack bigger ships.[118] The upscaling of vessel sizes points to a calculated plan to launch more brazen attacks in the coming months.

On 3 November 2025, pirates tried to board the Cayman Islands-flagged chemical tanker, *Stolt Sagaland*, about 332 nm off the Somali coast. Four armed attackers approached in a skiff and opened fire but were repelled by armed guards on board.[119]

On 6 November, a Maltese-flagged tanker, *Hellas Aphrodite*, was boarded by pirates who fired rocket-propelled grenades and small arms. The crew took refuge in the citadel (safe room) and retained control until the Spanish warship ESPS *Victoria*, under Operation Atalanta, arrived the next day and rescued the vessel.[120]

On 7 November, a suspicious approach was reported 528 nm south-east of Eyl, in the same area as a previous attack on the Marshall Islands-flagged LNG tanker, *Al Thumama*.[121] The vessel outran the attackers. Operation Atalanta has advised ships to exercise extreme caution, as pirate action groups continue to roam the area.[122]

Local enforcement, surveillance and international cooperation

Somali maritime monitoring and enforcement structures

The FGS lacks a functional navy or coastguard that can venture beyond a few nautical miles to patrol, monitor and inspect licensed local and foreign vessels and deter illegal vessels from IUU fishing. This has not always been the case.

Somalia once had a navy, established with the support of the Italian Navy before independence and further developed after independence with Soviet help. It maintained bases in Berbera and Kismayo and a radar station in Merca, but all its facilities and equipment were destroyed during the 1990s civil war.[123]

A 2017 UN review observed that the navy remains underdeveloped and incapable of protecting the Somali coast without the support of international naval partners, such as Operation Atalanta. It has a

mere 500 personnel, with plans to scale up to 5 000. It currently operates 11 ONUK MRTP Class 16 patrol boats, eight Grand Rigid Inflatable Boats,[124] and two Eurocopter AS532 twin-engine, medium-weight, multipurpose helicopters donated by Türkiye. In June 2012, the UAE donated US$1 million to enhance its capacity, but the funds were squandered in grand corruption, and there is nothing to show for it.[125]

Since 2011, Türkiye has become Somalia's closest ally, signing a 10-year naval agreement in 2024 and another on offshore exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons. The maritime agreement is expected to build the capacity of the Somali naval forces to deter IUU fishing and other crimes in its EEZ.

The Somali Navy has limited capacity to patrol the coast or enforce compliance with its EEZ

EUCAP has strengthened Somalia's maritime security capacities by training the police, coastguard, navy and justice stakeholders[126] and by supporting the development of the draft Coast Guard Bill and other maritime laws and policy alongside UNODC and other UN agencies since 2013. The draft bill is yet to be formally adopted, impeding its implementation.

As it stands, the Somali Navy has limited capacity to patrol the coast or enforce compliance with its EEZ without international support. Based mainly in Mogadishu, it operates close to shore and cannot enter the waters of FMSs such as Puntland, Jubaland or Somaliland, leaving these regions to develop their own systems to monitor, detect and deter IUU fishing.

This brings us to review the capacity of Puntland, the member state most affected by IUU fishing. It has two maritime security formations: the PMPF and the Bosaso Port Maritime Police Unit, part of the Puntland Police Force. PMPF, established in 2011 at the height of piracy, is 'tasked with deterring, detecting and eradicating piracy, illegal fishing and other coastal crimes; protecting marine resources; and delivering humanitarian relief supplies to the Somali people.'[127]

A ship at Bosaso Port, Puntland, which is being expanded with UAE support

Source: Authors

Initially trained by Saracen International, a UAE-funded South African military contractor, which changed its name to Sterling Corporate Services in 2012, PMPF has a shady past. The military contractor staff were accused of human rights violations against trainees in the formative years and the group operated almost as though they were a private army of the then government.[128] Although the exact number of PMPF personnel is not readily available, it is estimated to be over 3 000 officers, with about 200 specialising in maritime security.[129]

PMPF and Bosaso Port Maritime Police Unit officers receive significant support from the UAE to fund their salaries, technical equipment and training. UAE aid to Puntland extends beyond the two forces to include the management, development and ongoing expansion of Bosaso Port, as well as current counterinsurgency operations against the Islamic State–Somalia. The UAE therefore wields enormous influence over the Puntland government, as Türkiye does over the FGS in Mogadishu. The rivalry between the two middle powers persists in the ongoing political infighting between the FGS and the FMSs.

The PMPF is under Puntland's Ministry of Security and is headquartered in Bandar Siyada, with bases in Alula, Qandala, Eyl, Bosaso and other coastal

towns. As of 2017, PMPF had 12 rigid-hulled inflatable boats and two helicopters.[130] Its capabilities are significantly advanced for land-based operations, thanks to the vast technical support and donations it has received, given its pivotal role in degrading the Islamic State–Somalia from late 2024. However, limited manpower and equipment constrain the PMPF's ability to monitor and enforce maritime compliance along a 1 500 km stretch of coastline and the EEZ. The Puntland government lacks satellites and other advanced communication systems and relies on international naval forces deployed in its waters for support.

Just like the Somali Navy, police and coastguard forces, the PMPF benefits from continuous maritime capacity-building training and the donation of technical equipment from EUCAP[131] and UN agencies. These international partners also support the criminal justice chain, develop fish markets and provide technical and financial help to artisanal fishermen.

Being the most equipped and trained security force, the mandate of PMPF has, over the years, expanded beyond its initial maritime focus. It is the primary army for the semi-autonomous region employed in various operations, from counterterrorism to electoral monitoring, disaster response and general policing duties.[132]

International maritime cooperation

The EU maintains a close partnership with the FGS, supporting Somalia's security sector and other critical sectors through direct collaboration with the federal government. It provides technical advice and training to strengthen the capacities of various sectors, including the criminal justice system, police, navy and coastguard, fisheries and the army and has been instrumental in curbing piracy and investing in the growing maritime security agencies to address piracy, IUU fishing and other related maritime crimes.

Since its inception in 2008, Operation Atalanta, with over 700 staff, has been a major deterrent to piracy off Somalia's coast. Based in Mogadishu, with field offices in Somaliland and Puntland, EUCAP Somalia supports the Somali Police Force and strengthens maritime security.[133] It cooperates with the EU Special Representative for the Horn of Africa, the EU Delegation to Somalia, the EU Training Mission to Somalia and Operation Atalanta, as well as the UN, AU and other partners.[134] The EU extended the mandates of Atalanta, the EU Training Mission and EUCAP Somalia until February 2027 to strengthen maritime security in the region.[135]

Operation Atalanta, with over 700 staff, has been a major deterrent to piracy off Somalia's coast

Other naval forces that have been instrumental in anti-piracy and maritime security in Somali waters include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Operation Ocean Shield (2009–2016) and Combined Maritime Forces' CTF-151. ATMIS, the AU Transition Mission, partners with EUCAP to train the Somali Navy and coastguard officers, most recently in May 2023.

UN agencies, such as the UNODC and FAO Somalia, conduct maritime, fisheries and food security training, technical support and capacity-building. The UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme strengthens Somalia's maritime law enforcement, judicial cooperation and legislation through specialised training, technology for maritime domain awareness and support for cross-border investigations.[136] It also helps develop fisheries laws and policies at both federal and state levels and strengthen prisons for maritime crimes, such as in Garowe. FAO Somalia supports fisheries governance, maritime security and community livelihoods through initiatives to strengthen the agri-food system across member states.

The key issue is less the impact of international support and more how the global community navigates relations with Somalia's partially dysfunctional federal government and relatively functional member states like Somaliland and Puntland. Operating under a transitional constitution with unclear resource sharing between the FGS and FMSs, governance is largely clan-based. Some FMSs act almost as sovereign entities, managing law enforcement, maritime security and fisheries regulations significantly better than the federal government while engaging directly with international partners.

To navigate these precarious relations, many international partners work through the federal government while also strengthening law enforcement, maritime security, fisheries sectors and community-level initiatives in the member states. This balancing act often puts these partners in a challenging position not to be caught in frequent political bickering and maintain strategic neutrality.

The partners also deal with years of institutional collapse; their support to law enforcement, fisheries and maritime capacity and policy development often faces bureaucratic bottlenecks, slow implementation, institutional leadership changes and endemic corruption. These challenges are more pronounced at the federal than member state levels.

On the flipside, conversations with member state government officials, fishing company owners, researchers and artisanal fishermen draw a picture of mistrust of many international partners. They indicate that most naval forces deployed in Somali waters protect their vessels and are reluctant to detect and deter IUU fishing as something out of their mandate.

Middle power rivalry over Somali waters

Türkiye and the UAE yield immense influence over Somalia's federal and member state authorities, with direct bearing on maritime security and fisheries. Their competition along with allied Gulf partners intensifies debates over sovereignty, resource access and post-war reconstruction. Both powers are involved not only in defence development, but also in air, seaport and road infrastructure projects. This geopolitical rivalry has, to some extent, edged out or reduced the influence of major global powers in Somalia as the political and economic impact of these middle powers grows.

The Türkiye–Qatar alliance is aligned with the federal government and central political elites. In contrast, the UAE–Saudi alliance works closely with member states and Somaliland. The federal elites, including key government functionaries, are frequently in Ankara. Turkish Airlines flies to Mogadishu multiple times a week. Similarly, the member state presidents, such as those of Puntland and Somaliland, often visit UAE cities to ink security and infrastructure deals and bolster trade directly with the Gulf state.

Turkish President Recep Erdogan was the first foreign leader to visit Mogadishu in 2011 during the devastating drought and famine to offer humanitarian aid. Ever since, Türkiye has pursued a long-term strategy, investing in the reconstruction and management of the country's main airport, building roads, the primary seaport, hospitals, mosques, schools and military training camps. It has also deployed special forces, donated sophisticated weaponry, including drones and helicopters, to bolster the fight against al-Shabaab and conducted airstrikes against terrorist targets. In effect, its influence on military defence, economic and social life at the federal level is significant.

The UAE and US have played a pivotal role in Puntland's counter-terrorism operations

The UAE has invested in port projects through subsidiary Emirati companies. The ports of Berbera in Somaliland and Bosaso in Puntland are examples of such investment. The UAE also supports the training of maritime forces for both regions. In the case of Puntland, it played a key role in establishing PMPF in the early 2010s and has since supported its capacity development. It also pays salaries for the maritime force.

Since December 2024, the UAE, alongside the US, has played a pivotal role in Puntland's successful counterterrorism operations against the Islamic State–Somalia. In early 2024, Türkiye and Somalia signed two agreements. The first allows Türkiye to explore and extract Somalia's offshore hydrocarbon deposits, estimated at 30 billion barrels, process and sell the products internationally and share the proceeds with Somalia.[137, 138] This grants Türkiye the right to prospect for gas and oil throughout Somalia's territorial waters. The second, a 10-year maritime defence and security memorandum of understanding, makes the Turkish Armed Forces a partner in reconstructing, equipping and training the Somali Navy while receiving 30% of the revenue from Somalia's EEZ.[139] This could strengthen enforcement against IUU fishing and other maritime crimes.

These two deals, widely celebrated as a game-changer by federal government officials and some citizens, were not initially shared with the public. There was little, if any, information on them aside from media pictures and limited details about them from the signatories. All this changed on 2 April 2025, when the Turkish Parliament discussed and shared the terms of the hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation deal signed the previous year for ratification. There was public uproar over the revealed terms.

Key terms of the hydrocarbon deal include Türkiye's exemption from upfront costs and fees before starting exploration and extraction; entitlement to up to 90% of annual production to recover expenses and Somalia's royalty capped at 5% in kind or cash. Türkiye also has unrestricted export rights and the flexibility to form partnerships or use subcontractors without bureaucratic hurdles.[140]

Critics condemned the deal as an insult to Somali sovereignty over its resources, accusing the government of signing a neocolonial resource exploitation agreement with a foreign power without proper consultation with the public and the FMSs. They also questioned Türkiye's long-term investment in Somalia as a pre-calculated strategy to take advantage of the conflict-ridden country, which is unable to negotiate effectively in such an asymmetrical balance of power.[141] The deals were described as one-sided and exploitative.[142] A former anti-piracy initiative head in Puntland said, 'We haven't even seen the agreement to have an intellectual sense of it.'

Critics accused the government of signing a neocolonial resource exploitation agreement with a foreign power

This brings us to the undisclosed terms and conditions of the maritime defence agreement. Aside from the promise that Türkiye is expected to oversee the maritime defence and help Somalia build its navy for the next 10 years, no other terms are available for analysis. If the controversy surrounding the finally disclosed hydrocarbon deal is anything to go by, similar reactions can be expected from the Somali public.

The leaders of the FMSs also contest the maritime deal. Puntland politicians consider the Turkish hydrocarbon and maritime deal null and void and not applicable to their waters. They condemn the federal president as unilaterally entering into agreements without consulting the FMSs, as is constitutionally required. Leaders also point out that growing authoritarianism and deliberate undermining of Somali federalism and corruption at the federal government level fuel this tendency to engage in 'shady' arrangements.[143] A senior government official said:

> What they sign in Mogadishu does not concern us or apply to us. The federal government and partners cannot dare come into our EEZ to explore our natural resources or extend their maritime security patrols. We can take care of our side of the sea.

Another irate senior Puntland official remarked:

> We don't know what is in that deal and, frankly, we are not bothered, as we were not consulted. Deals signed between the federal government and its partners remain at the centre. We are not party to it and would not be bound by it.

On 17 December 2025, OYAK, Turkey's military pension and investment fund, signed an agreement with Somalia's Ministry of Fisheries and Blue Economy that transfers nationwide control of fishing licensing and regulation to a newly created OYAK-controlled company. This comes despite OYAK having no known experience in fisheries management.

Senior Turkish and Somali defence and maritime officials attended the signing ceremony. Under the agreement, a joint company called SOMTURK, which had been incorporated in Somalia six days earlier on 11 December, has been granted exclusive authority over Somalia's entire fishing sector. SOMTURK will issue all fishing licences, register vessels, monitor fishing activity, and enforce regulations across Somalia's territorial waters and exclusive economic zone.

The arrangement effectively places administration of Somalia's fisheries, a strategically important and economically valuable sector, under the control of an entity managed by Turkey's defence-linked pension

fund. The transfer of such sweeping authority to an organisation without a documented track record in fisheries or marine resource governance has raised concerns about the country's sovereignty over its maritime resources.

Like previous agreements with Turkish authorities, this deal was concluded by the federal government without explicit consultation with federal member states or key national and regional political leadership. The lack of stakeholder involvement in decisions affecting Somalia's natural resources continues a pattern that has drawn criticism from regional actors.[144]

Chart 6: Tabulation of maritime and fisheries interests

Country or international partner	Influence and partner	Interests and investment opportunities	Conflicts
Türkiye	FGS	Maritime security, marine resources, hydrocarbon exploration, counterterrorism, airports, seaports, hospitals, roads	Supports FGS putting it in conflict with FMSs hostile to the FGS, signs deals with FGS on marine and land resources without consulting FMSs, emboldens FGS authoritarianism and centralisation of power; supports FGS economic development covers key sectors such as maritime security, marine resources, hydrocarbon exploration, counter-terrorism, airports, seaports, and social protection systems; has strong interest in securing strategic economic deals related to fisheries, oil and other mineral resources, alongside promoting a governance model for Somalia that concentrates these powers at the federal level. While this approach is presented as support to the Somali state, it also reflects Turkey's own economic interests. Its approach risks sidelining Somalia's existing social structures, federal system, and locally rooted governance mechanisms.
UAE	Puntland Somaliland FGS	Ports, maritime security, airports, counterterrorism, technical support to security agencies	Deals directly with FMSs, arms and pays salaries for member state security agencies and FGS forces, participates in counterterrorism operations unliterally in Puntland, invests in sea and airports, pursues long term strategic and economic engagements that serves Emirati and Somali interests. It is also well aligned in FGS security sector support.

Recommendations based on research output

Federal Government of Somalia

- Resource-sharing deliberations: The FGS needs to finalise pending resource and benefit-sharing agreements with FMSs as stipulated by the Constitution, ensuring equitable distribution of land and sea resources and improving intergovernmental relations.
- Discuss and enact pending laws: The FGS needs to, in consultation with the FMSs, finalise the Federal Constitution and other maritime security and fisheries laws, such as on the coastguard and navy and refrain from unilaterally passing fishing laws.

- Public disclosure of federal maritime and fisheries agreements and deals with foreign countries and partners: Transparency, public participation and disclosure of maritime deals with the public, achieved through full consultation, will foster amicable relations between the FGS and FMSs and gain public trust.
- Leverage UN Security Council members to lobby for IUU fishing measures: As a non-permanent member, Somalia needs to capitalise on this opportunity to advocate for a global resolution addressing IUU fishing and seek an extension of international naval mandates to combat IUU fishing and other maritime crimes.
- Invest in fisheries and maritime infrastructure: The FGS, with international partners, needs to invest in vessel monitoring, patrol boats, cold storage, landing sites and small ports.
- Reliable data collection: With aid from international partners, the FGS needs to invest in federal-wide fishing data collection and catch reporting systems to generate accurate and evidence-based data that can be used for planning and development of the sector.
- Unified licensing system: The FGS needs to exercise its federal-wide fishing authority in collaboration with the FMSs and streamline issuance of licences at local, regional, national and foreign levels. The FGS also needs to prosecute those involved in illicit licensing practices.
- Work on international certification for Somali marine products: In collaboration with member states, the FGS needs to seek international standardisation and certification of fish and marine products, promote their export and help local fishermen access global markets.
- Prioritise the development of the maritime forces: The FGS, in collaboration with FMSs and international partners, needs to strengthen the navy, coastguards, fisheries inspectors, specialised judges and courts and fisheries officers' capacities.

Puntland State of Somalia

- Synergise with the FGS on resource sharing: Puntland needs to engage with the FGS to resolve pending agreements and secure arrangements protecting its interests and autonomy.
- Enhance maritime capabilities of PMPF: Puntland needs to strengthen the maritime component in PMPF, expanding its equipment, vessels, expertise and numbers to address the growing IUU fishing activities in its waters.
- IUU fishing and piracy: Puntland needs to address factors that fuel IUU fishing, such as the depletion of marine resources and collaborate with international partners to address the growing incidents of piracy.

Transparency, public participation and disclosure of maritime deals with the public, will foster amicable relations

- International certification for Somali marine products: In collaboration with the FGS, Puntland must work for international standardisation and certification of fish and marine products, promote their export and help local fishermen access global markets.
- Curb illicit licensing: Puntland needs to enforce stiff penalties for illegal licensing, vessel violations and violent or environmentally dangerous fishing practices and deploy inspectors to ensure compliance.
- Reliable data collection: With aid from international partners, Puntland must invest in fisheries data collection and catch reporting systems to generate accurate and evidence-based data that can be used for planning and development of the sector. This could involve using mobile apps and basic feature phone functions to collect and aggregate data.
- Establish marine protection zones: Puntland, with international partners, needs to establish reserves to protect endangered species, limit access to breeding zones and prosecute overexploitation.
- Fishing port expansion: Puntland needs to develop underused landing sites and fish markets, improve port facilities and expand infrastructure to support the local fishing industry.
- Soft loans for fishermen and local fishing companies: Puntland needs to lobby Somali financial institutions and international partners to provide small and medium-term interest-free loans for fishermen and fishing company entrepreneurs to buy gear and expand their businesses for better returns.

International partners

- Strengthen local security and governance: International partners need to support the FGS and FMSs to boost naval forces, fisheries authorities, law enforcement and communities, curb IUU fishing and piracy, protect marine ecosystems and increase patrols.
- Enhance fishing and maritime policies and laws: International partners need to leverage their experience to help the FGS and FMSs enact more effective laws and implement policies and strategies to address IUU fishing and piracy.
- Help in acquisition of modern vessels for patrol and technological transfers: International partners need to help the FGS and FMSs acquire advanced patrol vessels, vessel monitoring systems, fisheries data collection techniques and devices. They should also increase their investment in fish handling facilities and markets for local fishermen.

Somali fishing stakeholders

- Report IUU fishing: Fishermen needs to collaborate with the FGS and FMSs to establish a system for reporting illegal vessels, illicit fishing, coral damage, pollution and other crimes to support enforcement.

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About ENACT

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