

# BOOK REVIEW

**Awet Tewelde Weldemichael. *Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa*.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. xi + 238 pp. List of Figures. Bibliography. Index. \$29.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1108739283.

*Piracy in Somalia: Violence and Development in the Horn of Africa* by Awet Tewelde Weldemichael is a book that adds fresh examination and a thoughtfully nuanced understanding of Somali piracy. The author challenges the conventional wisdom that state failure in Somalia was the first order effect of the rise of piracy in the 2000s and, by implication, that the best way to curb future piracy is to build the state. Instead, he weaves together evidence from primary and secondary sources—including over 100 interviews, 10 focus groups, and participant observation—collected over a six-year period to show that state failure was a second order effect. The first order effects of piracy were, according to Weldemichael, international illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and waste dumping, the ability of foreigners to quickly and easily pay ransom, unscrupulous criminals, unemployed Somali youth living in abject poverty, and the absence of Somali law enforcement. His argument has implications for effective counter-piracy in the long term, as discussed below.

In the early- to mid-2000s, piracy off the shores of Somalia was a phenomenon of international interest due to the ensuing disruption to ships traversing the Indian Ocean through Somali waters. As Weldemichael argues, if state failure was the primary cause of piracy, we should have witnessed its rise in the 1990s rather than in the 2000s. Instead, he shows how IUU fishing and international waste dumping in Somali waters increased significantly in the years after 1991, as there was no state presence to adequately protect Somalia's maritime territory. In addition, he provides evidence that at least a few corrupt Somali officials were complicit in IUU. As a result of environmental degradation of the waters and the ensuing decrease in fish populations, the livelihoods of local Somali fishermen were significantly and negatively impacted. It was this dynamic, combined with poor treatment of Somali fishermen hired by international foreign fishing companies, that led to retaliation by some fishermen in what Weldemichael classifies as vigilante pirate groups.

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Vigilante groups played a defensive role in trying to rid Somali waters of foreign industrial fishers. These groups extracted fines and attempted to destroy foreign ships in an effort to protect their livelihoods. Over time, piracy evolved into petty crime and robbery pirates, as well as traditional pirates who carried out kidnappings for ransom. The ease with which foreign ships paid ransoms incentivized the proliferation of piracy in a variety of intricate schemes, many cases of which Weldemichael covers in detail in Chapters Three and Four.


Local Somalis bore the brunt of piracy as instances of violence skyrocketed. Exacerbating the initial negative effects of IUU and waste dumping on local Somali livelihoods, much of the piracy money left Somalia immediately. It was either split between crime partners and left Somalia or was injected into legitimate business; in Kenya, there is evidence that piracy money contributed to the booming real estate market in Eastleigh. Low level pirates in Somalia squandered their money on vices, such as prostitutes, cars, and drugs.

In addition to offering this new insight into the causes and evolution of piracy, Weldemichael engages the debate about the extent of the relationship between Somali piracy and al-Shabaab. In post-9/11 geopolitics, many foreign counter-piracy efforts were disguised as counterterrorism efforts, although their real purposes were more nefarious. For example, private industry took their cue from the counterterrorism rhetoric: “maritime piracy offered especially lucrative opportunities to insurance underwriters, who furnished speculative hyperbole to threats of the piracy-terrorism nexus” (180). However, as the author argues in Chapter Five, the evidence is thin and the relationship between pirates and terrorism is best understood as a marriage of convenience rather than intentional collusion. The best evidence of a relationship between piracy and al-Shabaab is that in areas of Somalia under their control, al-Shabaab extracted taxes from pirates (as, I would note, they did from all other actors as well, including humanitarian organizations). Weldemichael further highlights a fundamental ideological difference between pirates’ lifestyles and their proclivity toward vice versus the strict indoctrination of al-Shabaab fighters as further evidence that it is unlikely pirates were al-Shabaab members.

Nevertheless, much of foreign counter-piracy efforts were military in nature, and local fishermen found themselves caught in the crosshairs. Further, the foreign responses have assumed that state failure was the root cause of piracy, so the actual root causes have gone unaddressed. Weldemichael closes by arguing that for an enduring solution to piracy, in addition to state building, counter piracy efforts need to address foreign IUU and waste dumping; to protect Somali resources on land and at sea; to rehabilitate the marine environment; to restore livelihoods and infrastructure; and to create sustainable jobs.

This book is a valuable contribution to the study of Somali piracy. But as I have written of previous books based on qualitative research in dangerous areas or on sensitive topics, Weldemichael misses an opportunity to advance

the practice of qualitative research, especially as scholars endeavor to improve qualitative methodologies (e.g., see the American Political Science Association's Qualitative Transparency Deliberations (QTD)). While Welde-michael outlines the types of interviews he conducted in the introduction of the book, more should be done to explain the interview process, including how interviewees were identified and selected, the interview questions, and how the data were analyzed. This kind of methodological explanation fosters replicability, an important tenet of research. It also provides reviewers with more information upon which to evaluate the soundness of the data, analysis, and conclusions.

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### For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

- Ingiriis, Mohamed Haji. 2018. "From Pre-Colonial Past to the Post-Colonial Present: The Contemporary Clan-Based Configurations of Statebuilding in Somalia." *African Studies Review* 61 (2): 55–77. doi:[10.1017/asr.2017.144](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2017.144).
- Lochery, Emma. 2020. "Somali Ventures in China: Trade and Mobility in a Transnational Economy." *African Studies Review* 63 (1): 93–116. doi:[10.1017/asr.2019.54](https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2019.54).