# Mobility, Trust and Exchange: Somalia and Yemen's Cross-border Maritime Economy

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X-BORDER
LOCAL RESEARCH NETWORK

## Somaliland, Puntland and Yemen




Cover image: Yemeni fishing boat and crew in Bareedo, Puntland © Khalif Abdirahman
This report was written by the independent researchers Nisar Majid and Khalif Abdirahman for the Rift Valley Institute (RVI). Research in Puntland was led by Khalif Abdirahman in collaboration with Ahmed Shire and Abdideeq Warsame (Puntland State University).
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The Rift Valley Institute works in eastern and central Africa to bring local knowledge to bear on social, political and economic development.

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# Summary


- Economic and social relations between present-day north-eastern Somalia (Puntland), and southern Yemen, reflect millennia-old historical and cultural ties. For many Somali-speakers, these ties across the sea with Yemen are more significant than those with the neighbouring states of Ethiopia and Kenya.
- While relations with the oil-rich Gulf states are now seen as a significant influence on Somalia's current politics, the deeper but lower profile social-economic ties between Yemen and Somalia are often overlooked. Their shared history and proximity, with the Gulf of Aden as a common maritime space, makes the respective coastal Yemeni and Somali communities extensions of each other.
- These enduring ties, and the movement and exchanges that animate them, have been more recently shaped by the long-term and unresolved civil conflicts that have affected both countries. Although Somalia and Yemen are not directly involved in each other's wars, their externalized conflict-affected economies are closely articulated.
- A social-economic, rather than security-focused, lens reveals how ties mediated through the maritime space provide local communities on both sides of the Gulf of Aden opportunities to preserve livelihoods and autonomy. This is especially true where formal state structures and services are absent, remote, dysfunctional or convulsed by conflict.
- The remote north-eastern Puntland coastal communities often report that they feel both marginalized and exploited by the inland—federally devolved—state authorities in Garowe. They also believe that a strong federal government in Mogadishu may be preferable, since they have seen little benefit from Puntland's devolved administration.
- In response to their weak position in the regional hierarchy, the coastal Somali clans, with the support of their religious and clan authorities, collaborate with their Yemeni counterparts to gain access to economic capital (credit) and social services. In return, Yemenis gain access to Somali fishing grounds, labour and markets.
- For the time being, these arrangements have proved mutually beneficial, underwritten by relationships of trust and mutual accountability. But strains are evident. This may be attributable to changes in fishing techniques as a response to external, global market-driven demands, which have reduced the economic benefits seen by small-scale Somali fishermen.

# 1. Introduction

The legacy of Somali piracy, the threat of terrorists transiting between Yemen and Somalia, and the deepening conflict in Yemen, mean international actors tend to view the Gulf of Aden through a security lens. This report outlines the local social and economic relations that criss-cross the maritime border between Yemen and Somalia, and which, despite being less visible to international policy-makers, make an important contribution to the resilience of communities in both countries.

The aim of this study is to better understand the communal connections—based on trust and mutual accountability—that exist between populations in northern Somalia and southern Yemen, focussing specifically on the sea corridor connecting communities in the remote far north-eastern littoral of Puntland, a federal state of Somalia, with coastal communities in Yemen. Such connections are potentially very significant, as they help coastal communities adapt to regular periods of political volatility and conflict, including the ongoing Yemen war. It is essential, therefore, that policy-makers, researchers and those involved in the region, are able to gain insight into how these relations function, and whether external, global market-driven demands are putting a strain on them.

A range of coastal settlements were visited in June 2018 and December/January 2018/19, most of which were small, remote fishing ports, including Bargal, Bareedo, Tooxin and Xaabo. Research was also carried out in Bosasso—Puntland's largest port—which functions as a regional centre for business (particularly import and export) and investment, and in Garowe, the inland state capital.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with local authorities, elders, skiff (small boat) owners, traders, fishing crew and other residents, who operate or live in both Somalia and Yemen.[1] Semi-structured interviews focused principally on the organization and significance of the fishing industry, the most important economic connection between Yemen and Somalia observed in this research.[2]

1 Approximately 50 interviews were conducted by Khalif Abdirahan, Abdideeq Warsame and Ahmed Shire.

2 The limited secondary literature on this area and its economic livelihood was also consulted.

# 2. Historical roots of the system

## Ports, hubs and migrant communities

Somalia and Yemen's close social and economic ties are mediated across their maritime borders via hubs centred on large port-cities—Bosasso (Puntland) and Berbera (Somaliland); and Mukalla and Aden (Yemen)—as well as the many smaller ports and landing beaches along both coasts. Historically, these port-cities and coastal settlements have facilitated the movement of a wide variety of goods, including livestock, charcoal, foodstuffs, fish and other maritime products, frankincense, arms and people (including free and unfree labour).

During the late nineteenth century, Somalis were already recognized as a significant presence in Aden, which, due to its superb natural harbour, attracted traders from all over the world. Somali businessmen used Aden as an export market for livestock, livestock products and charcoal, particularly after it became a garrison town under British control in the early twentieth century.[3] The Berbera–Aden sea-corridor remains an important trade and travel route today, although it has been affected by the rise of Djibouti and Dubai—and to a lesser extent Bosasso—as important hubs in the wider maritime region.

The Bosasso–Mukalla sea-corridor to the east also has a longstanding history of trade and mobility, linking a different set of Somali and Yemeni communities and their territorial hinterlands to those of the Berbera–Aden route. East of Bosasso, the fishing sector links a more dispersed group of smaller maritime centres, including Bargaal, Bareedo, Tooxin and Xaabo on the Somalia side, to Mukalla and the smaller sea-ports of Al Shihir and Qusay'ir on the Yemen coast.

The Bosasso–Mukalla corridor, including the fishing sector and supply chain, is transacted through the region's two main lineage-based communities (sometimes termed 'tribes' in the older academic literature). These are the Hadrami of Yemen and the Harti of north-eastern Somalia (the latter are mainly associated with Puntland and the contested regions of Sool and Sanaag), and their associated clans and sub-clans. The Hadrami, primarily of the Hadramawt governorate, are the best-known migratory population from Yemen, and have long-established diaspora communities as far away as India and South-east Asia, as well as along the Horn and the Swahili coast.[4] The Harti, which includes the

3 Leila Ingrams and Richard Pankhurst, 'Somali Migration to Aden from the 19th to 21st Centuries', in *Uncovering the History of Africans in Asia,* eds. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Jean-Pierre Angenot, Leiden: Brill, 2008.

4 Susan Beckerleg, Ethnic Identity and Development: Khat and Social Change in Africa, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010; Ulrike Freitag and William G. Clarence-Smith, eds. Hadrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s to 1960s. Leiden: Brill, 1997; Engseng Ho, Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

Warsangeli and the Mijerteen (Ismaan Mahmoud), also have a strong maritime identity and dispersed diaspora presence, including longstanding communities in Yemen.[5]

A local Sultan in Bosasso, in present-day Puntland, describes the Somali–Yemen relationship in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century:

> The countries were not as separated as they are now. People moved freely and everyone settled wherever they wanted. Hadramawt is close to Somalia physically and culturally … The Hadramis were coming to Somalia for centuries. They are mainly merchants. They were running away from poverty in Hadramawt … We were always mixing and intermingling. We received each other as guests and fed each other. We travelled in each other's territory without restriction.[6]

For much of their history, the regions encompassed by present-day north-eastern Somalia (Puntland), Somaliland and (southern) Yemen have been, in many respects, extensions of each other. They shared a religious and cultural identity that was mutually influenced through social and economic interactions, easing and enabling interactions even to this day. For many Somali-speakers these ties were more significant, and welcoming, than those held with the states and communities of the modern borderlands with Ethiopia and Kenya. These ties were further strengthened through the incorporation into the British (Indian Ocean) Empire in the late nineteenth century.[7]

## Postcolonial change

The second half of the twentieth century saw major political changes in both territories, and a greater emphasis on sovereignty and nationality. At Somalia's independence in June 1960—which saw British Somaliland joining Italian Somaliland three days after its formal independence—there were considerable numbers of Yemenis living in port cities and settlements on the coast, as well as inland, where they owned property and businesses (including farms much further south along the Juba and Shabelle river valleys). After independence, these communities were asked to decide between Somali citizenship or returning to Yemen. Present-day informants claim that while 80,000 people returned to Yemen, a greater number chose to stay on.[8]

In spite of hardening definitions of citizenship, cross-maritime exchange between Somalia and Yemen (and the Arabian Gulf) accelerated and expanded, with new urban markets and technologies. In the 1970s and 1980s, the pull of the oil-rich Gulf economies also drove regional migration, which created new and larger diaspora populations,

5 According to Somali oral tradition, the eponymous ancestors of Somali clans are said to have originated from Yemen, bringing Islam with them.

6 Interview with local sultan, Bosasso, 27 June 2018.

7 Scott Reese, *Imperial Muslims: Islam, Community and Authority in the Indian Ocean, 1839–1937*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

8 Interview with local sultan, Bosasso, 27 June 2018.

and saw a dramatic escalation of remittance flows back into Somalia and Yemen. This had significant impacts on both countries' economies.

At the same time, livestock exports to the Gulf remained the biggest domestic sector of the Somali economy as well as bringing in the largest amount of export earnings. Prior to the collapse of the state, livestock was exported primarily through the northern ports of Berbera and Bosasso. Even after the collapse of the state during the 1990s, livestock exports continued. At this time, the links with Yemen became important as a re-export hub for Somali livestock, in particular when Saudi Arabia imposed a ban on direct imports from the northern Somali ports. Yemeni re-exporting of Somali goods was later replicated in the fishing sector.[9]

## The impact of civil war in Somalia

Civil conflict in Somalia from the 1990s onwards saw hundreds of thousands of people flee the country, many of whom were granted asylum in Yemen. They, along with existing Somali populations, formed a sizeable and mobile population with strong links back to their homeland. An older boat captain from Tooxin comments that:

> We were entering [Yemen] with our pride and dignity intact and we were travelling inside Yemen in the same manner. There were always problems between North and South Yemen but both of them were treating us well and their problems were not affecting us in any way.[10]

This picture, however, contrasts with more recent depiction of Somalis in refugee camps, and in dangerous and squalid conditions in other parts of Yemen. These distinctions reflect the difference between (the primarily coastal) Somali populations that had long-term, pre-established relations with Yemen and its people, and those originating from further inland and the Somali region of Ethiopia, where different clans and social groups are found, and where conflict and displacement has been most pronounced over the last two decades.

The Rahanweyn people of Bay and Bakool regions in Somalia's South West State, for example, have been one of the clans most frequently making the sea crossing from Bosasso as refugees, while having less established relations with Yemeni communities.[11] A group of Yemeni elders interviewed in Qardho suggest that the long-established Somali communities are primarily found in Aden, Sanaa and Mukalla, with refugee communities also found in Aden and Sanaa, but not in Mukalla.[12]

9 Peter Little, *Somalia: Economy Without State*, Oxford: James Currey, 2003; Nisar Majid, 'Livestock Trade in the Djibouti, Somali and Ethiopian Borderlands', London: Chatham House, September 2010.

10 Interview with 58-year-old boat captain, Tooxin, 26 December 2018.

11 Research and Evidence Facility, EU Trust Fund for Africa, 'Migration Between the Horn of Africa and Yemen: A Study of Puntland, Djibouti and Yemen', 25 July 2017.

12 Interview with group of six Yemeni elders (recent arrivals), Qardho, 29 June 2018.

Since the start of the current conflict in Yemen in 2015, however, many Somalis have left the country to seek refuge elsewhere (including back in Somalia). There has also been a marked and parallel growth in the flow of Yemeni refugees and economic migrants to Somalia, especially to the major towns and cities of the north.[13] Yemeni elders report that they have been welcomed in Puntland and claim the elders there have greater autonomy from, and influence with, the Puntland authorities, who can lobby for services on their behalf. They believe this to be less the case in Somaliland.[14]

13 International Organization for Migration, 'IOM, UNHCR Work Together to Aid Migrants and Refugees Fleeing Yemen', 10 June 2015. Accessed 29 April 2019, https://www.iom.int/news/iom-unhcr-work-together-aid-migrants-and-refugees-fleeing-yemen.

14 Interview with group of six Yemeni elders (recent arrivals), Qardho, 29 June 2018.

# 3. The modern maritime economy

After the collapse of the Somali state in the 1990s, the development of the semi-autonomous Puntland and the de facto independent Somaliland has partly depended on the proximity and access to the oil-rich Gulf economic hubs.[15] The longer-standing and lower-profile economic links between Yemen and Somalia are less well known but equally important. These were further developed through the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen (1990–2015).[16] Prior to becoming President, Saleh was known for his trading links (including smuggling) across the Gulf of Aden. After Somalia's descent into civil war, his regime exploited the open Somali economy and shared maritime space, while offering support and succor to Somalis in Yemen.

From the 1990s onwards, Yemen's fish exports have been ranked second, after oil, in economic importance, increasing in volume by 300 per cent between 1990 and 2004. Yemen's development of this sector appears to have directly benefited Somali investors, traders and fishing communities, despite it being considered neglected and underdeveloped in recent economic sectoral analyses of Somalia.[17]

Not only has the better capitalized Yemeni fishing industry and market helped support struggling Somali livelihoods, it has provided additional opportunities through the movement of people and goods facilitated by the shared fishing economy. One consequence of this highly open economy, however, has been the creation of an enabling environment for the growth of other, less desirable, types of movements across the Gulf, including the transit of economic migrants to the Gulf and beyond, as well as arms and militant groups.

## Relative proximities

The small fishing centres of Bargaal, Bareedo, Tooxin and Xaabo (visited during this research) are part of a string of ports with close links to Yemen that also includes Las Qoray, to the west of Bosasso. An important characteristic of these small landing beaches and ports, which distinguishes them from the major sea port of Bosasso, is their lack of land-based transport infrastructure. Bosasso is a well-established trading hub with major and secondary roads linking maritime trade with the Somali populated interior. The smaller ports to the west and east of Bosasso are surrounded by mountains

15 For the case of Somaliland, see Mark Bradbury, *Becoming Somaliland: Reconstructing a Failed State*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008.

16 Ginny Hill, Peter Salisbury, Léonie Northedge and Jane Kinninmont, 'Yemen: Corruption, Capital Flight and Global Drivers of Conflict', London: Chatham House, September 2013.

17 Angelo Bonfiglioli and Khaled Ibrahim Hariri, 'Small-scale Fisheries in Yemen: Social Assessment and Development Prospects', Ministry of Fish Wealth, Republic of Yemen and UN Food and Agricultural Organisation, December 2004.

and linked on land through poorly constructed and slow-moving mountain passes and roads. A small trader from Bareedo explains this isolation: 'This part of the country used to be called "Gaariwaa" meaning "less vehicles". This shows how cut off it is from the rest of Somalia …[yet] Yemen [is only] 100 miles away'.[18]

These ports are, therefore, more closely connected by sea to each other and to Yemen, than to Bosasso or Garowe (by land). One male elder from Bareedo, speaking from Garowe, said:

> there was a time I was in Garacad [Indian Ocean, Mudug region] and I intended to travel to Barredo [Red Sea, near Bosasso]. I had two options: one, to go through the main road, from Galkayo to Bosasso and then to Bareedo, the other to join a boat sailing to Mukalla in Yemen and then get a boat from Mukalla to Baredo . . . [he chose the latter, saying] so this is how Yemen is nearer to us.[19]

A Somali businessman based in Bosasso makes a similar point, noting the strong cultural ties between ostensibly separate, yet closely-connected, communities either side of the Gulf of Aden:

> Mukalla is only 140 miles away from Bosasso. I don't feel a stranger in Yemen. We eat the same, dress the same, and for the most [part], think the same. We share a lot. You just feel you [are] in another region of Somalia. South Yemen is so close to Somalia in everything. Northern Yemen is different. They don't know much about Somalis. Many of the people you deal with in the south have Somali connections through ancestry or residence. So many speak Somali.[20]

While land-based transport infrastructure within and between much of Puntland is very limited, telecommunications providers, money-transfer services and numerous skiffs and boats easily facilitate connectivity between littoral communities. Mobile phone coverage is very good, with signal-masts visible in all of these coastal settlements, while money-transfer agents are also found across both the Somali and Yemeni sides.

In present day Puntland, political and economic power is focused to the west, between the sea port of Bosasso and the trunk road to the capital, Garowe, 400 km to the south. Coastal communities and clans located away from these main arteries claim to feel both marginalized and exploited. Despite their remote locations, they also claim to prefer a strong federal government in Mogadishu, given they have seen little benefit from Puntland's devolved administration in Garowe. Some of these grievances are believed to be exploited by the militant Islamic groups, al-Shabaab and Daesh (Islamic State in Somalia, or ISS).

The two main (sub-)clans that dominate the coastal and mountainous areas of the Bari region of Puntland, namely the Siwaqron and Ali Saleban, are both part of the large

18 Interview with small trader, Bareedo, 23 December 2018.

19 Interview with group of elders, Garowe, 19 December 2018.

20 Interview with two Somali businessmen, Bosasso, 26 June 2018.

(Harti-Darood) Mijerteen clan.[21] Yet the Siwaqron and Ali Saleban are smaller and less influential than the big three (Mijerteen) Mohamed Saleban lineages, who dominate Puntland politics.[22] These three Mohamed Saleban sub-clans—Omar, Osman and Isse—are associated with the three major Puntland political and economic centres of Bosasso/Qardho, Garowe and Galkayo. The relatively junior position of the Ali Saleban towards the Mohamed Saleban lineages is thought to have pushed the former towards al-Shabaab and ISS, helping equalize the balance of clan power.[23]

## Fishing

The Somali–Yemen fishing sector is artisanal and small to medium in scale. It is marked by deeply embedded social and economic relations, and the contrast with the large-scale extractive commercial fishing also taking place in Somali waters is stark. For the majority of households, fishing is likely to be the most important livelihood across coastal Bari. During the 1980s, under the Siyad Barre government in Somalia, various investments were made in the fishing and maritime area. This included fish-processing facilities in Las Qoray and Alula, and a boat-building factory in Mogadishu. After the 1991 civil war, local sources claim that a World Bank development project involving the fishing sector in Mogadishu was moved to Mukalla in Yemen.

While the central state in Somalia has remained contested and ineffectual for two decades, Yemen has, during this time, continued to make investments in its fishing sector. With international support, it has increased its capacity to make boats and fishing equipment, as well as developing ice-making, fish storage and processing facilities. Mukalla is now a major centre for the Yemen fishing industry, which partly works through cooperatives.[24] Somali actors are also believed to have made significant investments in the Yemeni fishing industry, to meet both the demand of the (Yemeni) domestic market and for exports. Somali fish are also re-exported via Yemen to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other markets.[25] Somalis are both investors (including from the diaspora) and labourers.

21 The cave where the original Darod forefather is said to have stayed on arrival from Arabia is located in Bareedo district.

22 Many other lineages and minorities are also found in this region.

23 The mountainous areas of Puntland are significant bases for militant Islamist groups, such as al-Shabaab and ISS. The research team avoided these areas on the coastal route they followed and were warned on many occasions not to ask sensitive questions. Tensions between al-Shabaab and ISS have been high in recent months. In addition, illustrating the presence of these actors, an assassination was carried out in Bosasso during the team's stay there.

24 Bonfiglioli and Hariri, 'Small-scale Fisheries'.

25 The main types of fish caught are white fish (demersal), mainly for re-export to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even China and Europe; black fish (pelagic)—tuna, sardines, anchovies—which are canned and consumed domestically or re-exported; and shark/shark fin, which may be caught to supply special orders from China.

Three types of fishing systems are identified by coastal communities:[26]

- *Xaawi* is industrial-scale fishing with ships typically of 100–300 tonnes, mostly coming from Iran, China and the Philippines. This method is considered environmentally destructive as it involves dragging large nets along the sea floor. There does not appear to be any Somali or Yemeni involvement in this sector.
- *Istilam* is the most common method used by Somali–Yemen partners. It involves buyers (Yemeni, Somali and joint enterprises) bringing their small-to-medium-sized boats (10–40 tonnes) to the various small port areas, and buying fish from local (mainly Somali) fishermen, who use smaller skiffs (1–2 tonnes). In this system, fish are mostly caught using small nets.
- *Istiyaad* has significantly expanded in recent years and involves the same small-to-medium-sized boats who, under this system, use their own skiffs and crew (predominantly Yemeni) and/or hire other skiffs, to catch fish for their boats. They are therefore not buyers. This is predominantly line-caught rather than net fishing. The line method requires greater skill and provides a higher-quality catch, with fish caught alive and quickly frozen on the larger boats (net-caught fish often die before they are landed and deteriorate in quality). Yemeni fishermen are predominantly used in this form, and boat owners pay a tax, as well as providing food and fuel for the skiffs and their crew on a credit basis.

The *Istilam* and *Istiyaad* systems drive the Somalia–Yemen fishing economy, with small-to-medium-sized boats working in conjunction with thousands of smaller, motorized skiffs (at the time of research, there were an estimated 450 skiffs in Bargal, 1,000 in Xaabo, and 2,000 in Bareedo).[27]

The bigger boats pull several skiffs (typically four) when they come to fish in Somali waters, with each skiff holding approximately five people, usually the captain plus four fishermen. At the time of the research visit to Bareedo, which has an estimated resident population of 500 families, respondents reported 50 larger boats and more than 2,000 skiffs in its waters. These arrangements are capable of catching considerable amounts of fish, virtually all of which is taken to Yemen. A skiff owner, with a one-tonne capacity skiff, notes that 'when the season is right, from here we fill five to six boats of 15 tonnes [within one or two days]. That is [up to] 90 tonnes of fish'.[28]

Assuming five people per skiff (including the owner), and based on 450 skiffs in Bargal alone, this translates into approximately 2,250 individuals and their families benefitting from employment and income in this sector. This figure can be multiplied several times over for the north-east coastline, and includes families from both Somalia and Yemen.

26 *Xaawi*, *Istilam* and *Istiyaad* are the Arabic words for 'container', 'receiving' and 'fishing' respectively.

27 The actual location of skiffs is somewhat misleading as they move between areas depending on the availability of fish and the sea conditions.

28 Interview with skiff owner, Bargaal, 22 December 2018.

The crew on the larger boats, meanwhile, which are much smaller in number, add several hundred more to this figure. Over a season, the fishing catch will reach into the tens of thousands of tonnes, representing a value of many millions of dollars.

Many respondents to this study claim that, in some areas, the *Istilam* system is being replaced by *Istiyaad*, which is not as beneficial to small-scale Somali fishermen, who are sometimes entirely excluded from boats deploying this method.

## Frankincense

Frankincense has historically been an important export trade to Yemen, but is less so today. It comes in different grades, known locally as *beeyo* and *meydi*, and is used in chewing gum and perfumes, attracting prices of USD 10–20 per kg for *meydi* and USD 5–10 per kg for *beeyo*, depending on the exchange rate and other factors. During the Siyad Bare era there was regulation of this trade, although respondents report some was smuggled to Djibouti. Nowadays, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reported to be the main markets, though China and Europe are also referred to as the end markets for these products, likely through re-export via Yemen and/or Saudi Arabia.

The Bari coastal areas have two main seasons—the *Wajiin* and the *Xagaa*—unlike the four seasons experienced by most Somali territories of the Horn of Africa. It is in the *Wajiin* season, between June and August, that frankincense is harvested from the trees in the mountains. Each of the trees is collectively owned by large family groups. The trade in frankincense appears to be one of the main ways in which these small coastal settlements are connected with Bosasso. Larger traders are the main buyers and when they bring their trucks to collect the product they bring goods in bulk from their Bosasso base, particularly food items.

Frankincense also provides a reason to travel to Yemen, as there is a small, seasonal labour opportunity associated with the harvesting of frankincense in the mountainous border areas between Yemen and Oman. This collection is not generally done by Omanis themselves, and Somali labourers are reported as crossing the borders discreetly under the protection of Omani buyers, thus avoiding the requirement of getting an official visa. Similar labour opportunities may also be found on the Yemeni side, where many of these frankincense trees are reportedly found in the wild, and are not owned, as in Somalia. A businessman interviewed in Xaabo comments that:

> People collect frankincense and sell it to Mohamed Samatar [a businessman] who is in Bosasso … a lot of people get their food by selling frankincense and buying [getting] their food. So frankincense is connected to food.[29]

29 Interview with Somali businessmen, Bosasso, 24 December 2018.

# 4. Movement and mobility

The vibrancy of the fishing industry—which mostly supplies the Yemeni market, as well as some re-export to other countries in the Gulf—means that boats in the 10–40 tonne range are continuously travelling back and forth between these apparently isolated Somali ports and their counterparts in Yemen. They often have space for additional passengers and goods, particularly on the return journey to Puntland, when they are empty of fish. The boats that form the floating markets for fish in the waters around the various coastal settlements are also a collective market for some domestic products, particularly (camel) milk, honey and meat for immediate consumption. Of these, only honey is non-perishable and may be transported back to Yemen itself.

Yemen has also developed its own, small manufacturing base, the products of which are exported to coastal settlements and Puntland. Yemeni boats fishing in Somali waters (or buying Somali-caught fish) also carry basic commodities, such as fruit and vegetables, soap, detergents, biscuits, bottled water and other basic household consumables. Various fishing equipment required for this artisanal sector, including nets and spare parts for motorized skiffs, are also carried, as these are more easily brought from Yemen than Puntland.

## Managing the border

The populations of far-flung coastal settlements move back and forth between Puntland and the Hadramawt with relative ease. Transport is often free, although a small payment is sometimes required by the boat operators. A district official, interviewed in Xaabo, claims:

> [the] movement of people from or to both sides isn't a problem at all. It is as free as it has been for thousands of years. No documents are requested on both sides. [One] can go from here for free, shop there and come back.[30]

Proof of identification is useful, though not compulsory, to allow movement. Several methods were reported, including using a seaman's ID card issued by the Puntland authority, or claiming refugee status (in order to get an ID card). In the former case, ID cards are obtained relatively easily from Bosasso, and are based on the same seaman ID card used under the Siyad Barre government. These are handed over upon arrival in Mukalla, where a temporary ID card is provided based on the length of stay requested.

Obtaining a refugee ID card is another option, but is merely a formality, with people returning regularly and claiming another refugee ID card in order to enter the country. There is little enforcement of either of the above systems, and people who travel back

30 Interview with district official, Xaabo, 25 December 2018.

and forth regularly claim they are easily able to negotiate entry without any documents. Though bureaucratic procedures are followed more closely in the main ports, such as Mukalla and Bosasso, in the smaller ports and landing areas, no documents are necessary or checked. A passport is considered a liability for Somalis travelling to Yemen, as it may require the purchase of a visa.

If a traveler is visibly ill and seeking medical attention, these bureaucratic procedures are often waived. A government official in Bareedo reports that:

> we are much closer to Mukalla than to any major city including Bosasso. So, if anyone becomes sick and needs medical treatment, we always take them to Mukalla using the fishing boats that are going there. They never ask for documents, especially if the passenger is sick.[31]

During the UAE's recent intervention in Yemen, its military tried to tighten the borders on the Yemeni side by imposing the use of identity documents on Somalis. This did not last long, which Somali respondents see as another sign of the strong relationship they have with their Yemeni cousins. There may also be practical elements to this in terms of the economic interests at play in maintaining as frictionless trade and mobility as possible.[32]

31 Interview with government official, Bareedo, 23 December 2018.

32 Reportedly Somali traders did make profits by supplying Houthi forces with fuel. This eventually ended when Saudi Arabian and UAE air forces destroyed the boats involved. Somali individuals involved in the enterprise commented that they had made profits several times over the value of their boats by the time they were destroyed. Interview with three elders, Garowe, 19 December 2018.

# 5. Social dimensions of the economy

## Protection

In a maritime region increasingly exposed to the presence of several external players, Yemenis are viewed differently from outsiders from other countries, who are seen as taking a more extractive approach. For example, the *Xaawi* mode of industrialized, foreign-operated fishing fleets, which is dominated by Iranian and Chinese trawlers, is widely recognized as providing little benefit to Somali coastal communities. These large-scale commercial ships stay off-shore in deeper waters, and are not only environmentally destructive, but are dangerous to the local Somali- and Yemeni-operated boats and skiffs. Many Somalis have been reported killed by these boats. Reflecting on the threat from Iranian trawlers, one local fisherman notes: 'the Yemenis are different. They never take or destroy anything, and they never endanger your life or threaten you. In fact, they save many people in the sea.'[33] The same respondent claims that:

> The Yemenis protect us, unlike the Iranians who kill us, so we have good relations with them. They are people with whom we share blood and religion. Even if they kill one of us, we will contact their clans and families and they will face justice over there so they can't escape and they know it. There was a Yemeni who was killed in Gara'd, Mudug region. It was not intentional. It was an accident. Yet his family in Mukalla was given compensation. The agreement and the deliberations happened in Mukalla. Likewise, if one of us is harmed or killed by a Yemeni, we will deal with it here.[34]

An elderly fishermen, veterinary doctor and businessmen, interviewed in Xaabo, reports that:

> The Yemen boat owners working in Somalia must have Somali partners [*arbab*, the Arabic equivalent to the Somali *abaan*] who assist them in case of any attack or danger from the Somali communities: The same is true in Yemen also.[35]

In some areas, where the Puntland authorities have sold rights to Yemeni boats with no compensation for local communities, local hostility to these boats has led to an upsurge in paying for Somali protection (*Booyado*) rather than the mutually agreed system of *abaan/arbab*. This has caused some resentment within the coastal communities, who

33 Interview with fisherman, Bargaal, 22 December 2018.

34 Interview with fisherman, Bargaal, 22 December 2018.

35 Interview with boat owner/veterinary doctor/businessman, Xaabo, 20 December 2018.

view those collaborating with the business deals made between the state authorities and the Yemeni fishing community as helping to destroy the local fishing industry.[36]

## Capital and credit

The mutual trust that exists between the Somali and Yemeni business communities facilitates access to capital and credit for Somalis to equip and man their boats, as well as to access the wider fishing economy. An elder and former trader observes: 'we have no capital to start business, but we Somalis have abundant fish in our coastal Somalia, but Yemenis have the capital and they need fish'.[37]

Access to capital is sometimes facilitated through a Yemeni cooperative, where Somalis are able to borrow and repay the loan in installments, and Yemeni partners provide security for the loan when required. The fishing cooperative in Mukalla involves Somalis in its management. In addition to providing credit for fuel and other running costs of the boats, the cooperatives provide assistance in relation to accidents and repairs, regardless of whether boats are Somali or Yemeni owned.

These arrangements are also helped by the fact that many Somalis living in Yemen, including in Mukalla, have dual nationality. A Somali businessman, interviewed in Bosasso, explains that:

> I was living in Yemen for most of my life. I have been doing business there and here as well. I now run a business in Bosasso and go to Yemen less often. I have one wife and children living in Mukalla, Yemen, and another wife and children living in Bosasso. I travel between the two sides frequently. I co-own a 25-tonne fishing trawler boat with a Yemeni partner. The partner was brought in from Yemen and works here because there is more fish. The fish is taken back to Mukalla and sold there. I and my Yemeni partner have registered our company in Yemen so that we can buy a boat and can get a partial finance from the government of Yemen. We then fish on the Somali side. There are many businesses like this where Somalis and Yemenis cooperate to get the best of both sides.[38]

Boat ownership also reveals how the Somali–Yemen partnership allows access to otherwise exclusive resources, as well as avoiding paying for fishing licenses. Though boats may in fact be solely owned by a Yemeni or a Somali, or be jointly owned, formal ownership is obscured. Somali-owned boats are thus able to provide documents indicating they have a Yemeni owner when this is advantageous, and vice versa. This has the double benefit of providing protection in different waters and of reducing fees.

36 An elder in Bareedo stormed into an interview saying that we were talking to people who had never fished, but instead just protected Yemeni boats fishing in Somali waters for a few dollars. Interview with Somali elder, Bareedo, 23 December 2018.

37 Interview with elder and former trader, Bargaal, 25 December 2018.

38 Interview with two businessmen, Bosasso, 26 June 2018.

While Bosasso is not a hub for the fishing sector—such activity takes place around the smaller ports—many Somali investors in the sector are based in Bosasso. One such investor notes:

> we usually pay USD 1,200 including all the expenses such as fuel and other costs incurred by the boat, and we have the choice of who we want to recruit for the fishing activities of the boat. We hire both the Yemenis and Somalis depending on the market outlets available and [other] circumstances. If the boat fails to work, the owner should repair unless intentional damage is made by the renter. The renter should take the responsibility of the boat in its presence to Somalia, while when it reaches to Yemen the owner takes the responsibility of the boat.[39]

## Trust

Yemenis and Somalis living in these coastal areas are often related, either by blood or marriage. This is important when tensions or conflict takes place, and several respondents refer to the ties between these areas of north-east Somalia and Yemen in terms of common bloodlines. There is a centuries-old Somali population in Mukalla with so-called Somali mosques and well-known Somali Sheikhs, who are reported to play a central role in mediating Somali–Yemen relations. One businessman in Bosasso explained: 'If the Somalis and Yemenis conflict over some issues, the traditional elders [Sheikh Somali and Sheikh Xaara] from the both sides solve the dispute'.[40]

The Somali *diya* system is used to help settle disputes and agree on compensation, which is entirely compatible with the Yemeni traditional system. Islamic Shaira'a law is practiced by Sheikhs, who are often called upon in Somalia to do this, with both Yemenis and Somalis following the Shafi'i school of jurisprudence. A resident of Tooxin said: 'There is a man called Sheikh Somali, Jaamac Gaas, who is the Sheikh in Yemen, who is always in between Yemenis and Somalis. Yemenis trust him so much and [he] gets involved [in] everything between Yemeni and Somali'.[41]

These examples of mutually recognized Sheikhs and common dispute mechanisms form part of the social system of trust that exists across this sea corridor, and which helps sustain more transactional relations in the economic sphere. A local businessman provides the following examples:

> Dealings with Yemenis [are] simple … we base our dealings on trust. There is a lot of trust between us. You send a boat carrying goods worth USD 40,000 to a man who is only an acquaintance and he sends the money back to you. If he deceives or robs you, the families of the two sides will sort it out after holding talks. No

39 Interview with small boat renter, Bosasso, 28 December 2018.

40 Sheikh Somali is an actual elder, living in Mukalla, whereas Sheikh Xaara refers to the Yemeni elder or Sheikh of a particular area (*Xaara* means area/locale in Arabic). Interview with two businessmen, Bosasso, 26 June 2018.

41 Interview with local resident, Tooxin, 26 December 2018.

one can disappear as his family are the guarantors. Normally if a boat is attacked, the family of the owner will trace the boat to its last place and will start talking to the clan of that area. It will be their responsibility to find out what happened and to settle the problem. If you compare with the Iranians, we don't have any relations with them and we don't know much about them as we share nothing. … There are many traders of Somali origin in Mukalla who are a strong part of the relationship so people can use them as guarantors. There is a Sheikh (traditional elder) who will release you on bail if you are arrested in Mukalla. It is he who deals with problems if needed. There was a Somali man who bought a boat from Yemen for USD 300,000. He is from diaspora. It was clear that he was cheated as the boat he was sold was much cheaper than that. It was through this Sheikh that the man got the full refund.[42]

42 Interview with two small-scale businessmen, Bargaal, 22 December 2018.

# 6. Conclusion and future research agenda

This report, based on research in the remote north-western tip of Puntland, has shed light on the underlying economic and social relations transacted in the maritime space linking Somalia and Yemen, often in the complete absence of formal state structures. By focussing on the social and spatial dimensions of this relationship, which underpin economic activity in a variety of areas, insights can be gained into how these arrangements have proved mutually beneficial, being underwritten by trust and mutual accountability. Even so, strains—perhaps attributable to global, market-driven demands—are evident, and it is important to determine whether this is a long-term, potentially destructive, trend.

It is intended that the early findings presented in this report will inform future research looking at how contemporary dynamics may be changing this picture. This includes, for example, assessing the impact of changing global demands and taste for fish, the relative advantages of better capitalized and skilled Yemeni crews versus local Somali artisanal fishermen, and examining the consequences of the Red Sea's securitization—a process animated by piracy—on the relationships of cooperation that happen at sea.

The impact of the war in Yemen, and shifting dynamics in Hadramawt, will also need be considered. This includes changes in networks of migration and smuggling, which may have benefitted or disadvantaged actors on both sides of the Gulf of Aden. Fieldwork in remoter communities will be complemented by research in major port cities—principally Bosasso—and the business and political communities controlling these networks. Research in major port cities promises to illuminate the linkages between trade and local and regional power networks, as well as the role of South Asian and Arab communities in facilitating and channelling the Somalia–Yemen trading nexus.

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