

# Perceived Injustice: The Psychological Roots of Somali Piracy

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*Abstract- This research interrogates Somali piracy through an integrated framework of critical geopolitics, postcolonial theory, and psychologies of perceived injustice. Challenging conventional security narratives that reduce piracy to state failure and criminal opportunism, this study argues that piracy must be understood as a morally and politically significant act rooted in perceived injustices stemming from centuries of global power asymmetries. Drawing on discourse analysis and narrative inquiry, this dissertation demonstrates how marginalized coastal communities perceive piracy as symbolic agency against geopolitical domination. The findings re-theorize piracy not as deviance but as contested geopolitics emerging from postcolonial subjectivities and psychological responses to humiliation, dispossession, and misrecognition within global inequality.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The case of Somali pirates in the early twenty-first century became a defining feature of maritime insecurity. Global media and policy circles consistently portrayed pirates in Somali waters as an unfriendly threat to international commerce and maritime security. The conventional security narrative frames piracy as an outcome of state failure, poverty, and lawlessness essentially, an ungoverned space problem characteristic of modernity's irregularities. However, beneath material deprivation lie deeper historical and psychological currents shaped by centuries of colonial marginalization, exploitation, and appropriation of Somali maritime resources. Within this context, piracy operates not merely as criminality but as a moral economy born of betrayal and dispossession in an unjust world.

Somali coastal spaces constitute a dynamic arena where trade, warfare, exploitation, and resistance intersect across the *longue durée*—from precolonial maritime networks through colonial partition, post-independence state formation, collapse, foreign

predation, and international militarization. This historical reconstruction reveals how material, institutional, and symbolic contexts produced piracy as morally and politically significant practice. The research question guiding this study is: How do different narratives of injustice among coastal Somali actors inform perceptions of piracy as livelihood or resistance? What psychological dimensions underlie piracy involvement?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Somali piracy is explained by three scholarly lines. First, the Security and Governance Paradigm (Chalk, 2010; Klein, 2011) views pirates as logical agents reacting to opportunity structures and uses realist methods to link piracy to a lack of central authority, lax maritime police, and profitable ransom economies. Second, by presenting piracy as an organized social activity entwined with social legitimacy, economic redistribution, and clan affiliations, Political Economy and Sociological Perspectives (Bueger, 2013; Percy & Shortland, 2013) add complexity. Third, critical and postcolonial interventions (Bueger & Edmunds, 2019; Browning, 2020; Chazal, 2018) contend that piracy is a discursive fabrication used by Western actors to reclaim maritime control, challenging prevailing epistemologies. These approaches allow for local subjectivities, but they do not adequately address psychological factors.

According to postcolonial scholars (Fanon, 1961; Memmi, 1965; Mbembe, 2001), violent acts of rebellion are not just the result of deprivation but also the "psychological after-effect of injustice." This study places piracy on a spectrum of psychological reactions to perceived unfairness.

Three theoretical streams are drawn from the intellectual scaffolding:

1. Critical geopolitics challenges "common sense" classifications of "safe" and "dangerous" zones by examining the role of knowledge in creating spatial understanding. Western nations use piracy as a geopolitical symbol to exert geopolitical control over the Global South.
2. Postcolonial Thought: Examines how colonial legacies permeate modern representation and government (Said, 1978; Inayatullah & Blaney, 2004). The shoreline of Somalia is a symbol of past exploitation and neglect.

### III. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS

The Somali coast was part of the vibrant Red Sea and Indian Ocean trade networks before colonization. Horn pastoralist areas were linked to Arabian, Persian, and Indian subcontinental markets through port cities like Berbera and Zeila. There was maritime predation, but it was governed by protective laws, ad hoc coalitions, and local custom rather than codified international law. By the nineteenth century, these relationships had been upset by European imperialism, which imposed treaties that gave foreign trading interests' shipwreck protection precedence over Somali marine authority. European naval might shaped the coast's entry into an asymmetric global economy.

In addition to dividing the sea, the British, Italian, French, and Ethiopian powers divided Somali lands during the Scramble for Africa. In order to control the Red Sea-Indian Ocean passages to India, imperial strategies incorporated the coast. There was little infrastructure, and economies focused on exporting animals rather than expanding into fishing. Fisheries, environmental preservation, and fair resource access were neglected in favor of maritime governance that prioritized imperial security. The sea was viewed as an external "corridor," and Somali interests continued to be sidelined while coastal populations faced taxation, policing, and external control without the ability to influence maritime policy grievances that persisted after colonialism.

After gaining independence in 1960, British and Italian Somaliland inherited weak political structures, limited exports, and contested borders.

Clan militias and warlords lost control of territory when the state collapsed in 1991. The legal frameworks governing waters were discontinued when the Coast Guard and Navy ceased to function. Coasts turned into disputed open areas where ports could extract money through taxes and customs. In the absence of maritime enforcement, foreign trawlers were able to openly poach and dump poisons without running the risk of being intercepted. Gunfights against trawlers first aimed to curb poaching and recover damages. By the early 2000s, networks in Puntland had become experts at attacking commercial vessels as hijacking became profitable. Millions of dollars' worth of ransoms were handled by networks of financiers, scouts, armed hijackers employing skiffs, and mediators. The distribution of ransom funds among hijackers, clan chiefs, and accompanying merchants embedded piracy both economically and socially.

Importantly, grievance narratives continued to coexist with sophistication. Ransom-taking was presented as a way to make up for years of suffering and draw attention to Somalia's predicament on a worldwide scale. Actor self-perception is influenced by economic opportunity, historical experience, and justice ideologies.

The 2005–2011 piracy surge triggered unprecedented international naval response. Somali maritime space was internationalized due to its proximity to the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Aden, which transport substantial international oil and container traffic. The deployment of forces by the EU, NATO, and coalitions, along with the adoption of best management practices by maritime corporations, reduced the number of successful attacks. Internationalization, however, was accompanied by geostrategic rivalry, as military installations in Djibouti grew in order to project strength and combat terrorism. Counter-piracy served dual purposes securing energy flows and consolidating chokepoint control. For Somalis, safeguarding shipping seemed to take precedence over addressing the causes of

injustice, which exacerbated feelings of marginalization.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Through a combination of critical geopolitics, postcolonialism, and psychologies of perceived injustice, this dissertation critically investigates Somali piracy. The study shows that piracy emerges not as pathological criminality but rather as a contested practice expressing postcolonial subjectivities within the architecture of global inequality, tracing centuries of external dominance from precolonial trade imbalances through colonial division, post-colonial weakness, state collapse, and maritime predation. As a symbolic agency opposing global dominance, piracy is fueled by perceived injustice, humiliation, and misrecognition.

Limitations include a reliance on secondary testimonies that restricts direct ethnographic access, a temporal focus on peak 2005–2012 that necessitates modern validation, the positionality of non-Somali researchers that demands reflexivity regarding Global North interpretive authority, and multi-causal complexity that defies single-variable explanation.

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