



## Praise the Marines? I Suppose So

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### Pour citer cet article

Farah Nuruddin, « Praise the Marines? I Suppose So », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.2 (Éclats d'Afrique du Sud/South African Literature), 2007, mis en ligne en 2021.

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### *Cycnos, études anglophones*

*revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice*

ISSN 1765-3118      ISSN papier 0992-1893

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# EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

## **Praise the Marines? I suppose so**

**Nuruiddin Farah**

It's show time.

The Americans are giving their end-of-the-year extravaganza. The Somalis are impressed with this show of force. Those viewing the show on TV are pleased with the performance so far. Come to think of it, so are the "warriors," in the main marines spearheading the feed-the-starving protect-the-helpless American-led force: "warriors" who pose for a photo opportunity -- well-fed youths, faces wide with self-complacency, features fat with gourmet treats prepared in ovens offshore and flown in helicopters equipped with microwave facilities, while the Somalis starve!

I very much doubt that anyone, least of all America or its allies, would have come to Somalia's help earlier or faster if it had been dealt a fate similar to that of Kuwait. Since the end of the cold war, Somalia has meant less in geopolitical terms; also, it is peopled by blacks, is too poor to attract Western interests and has a 100 percent Muslim population.

How come America has committed an elite corps of marines to Somalia? By the time the world turned its attention to the Somali crisis, the famine had shaped up into a wicked force to be reckoned with, what with the photogenic skeletons of death, the visitation on one's conscience when the stretched skins of the near-starved entered living rooms via TV.

Is it all a matter of a post-Thanksgiving spot of charity on the part of an overfed nation to a starving one? Are things as simple as that? Or are there other, hidden motives?

I would be the first to admit that the crisis in Somalia is one of its people's making and is native to the country's ill-run clan patronage, although some of the inherent ills that have triggered the civic strife may have had their genesis outside. But when the worst was wedded to the worst, and several thousands lost their lives, and many more fled across the boundary as refugees -- when two and a half million fell victim to famine and lawless looting -- maybe it didn't matter who, in the end, came to intervene and under what guises, whether blue-helmeted or not, African or not, even if the intervening force had its own hidden agenda.

I have not desisted from censuring Africa for watching with mind-boggling indifference while the Somalis destroyed themselves, while the country collapsed into absolute anarchy -- the worst of its kind. I will spare

you my outrage at the Arab, the Muslim and the nonaligned leagues of which Somalia is a member. They are not worth my bother.

It's a shame, though, that it fell to the United States to take the lead by sending in the marines, and for the French and the Canadians to make contributions in order to salvage the so far unsavaged. Shame on you, Africa; shame on the Secretary General of the Organization of African Unity; shame on your heads of state. I speak as a pan-Africanist!

Shall we say, "Well done, America!" and be done with the matter?

As a former colonial, a pan-Africanist -- above all a Somali national who is bitter -- I confess that I find it extremely difficult to get myself psyched up to put my faith in the genuineness of a gesture of goodness originating in areas of the globe with a history of imperialist domination.

I realize I haven't any reason at this juncture to accuse America of imperialist objectives. It would be too simple-minded and rather unrealistic to think that Africa could have mounted a force comparable in strength and efficacy to that of the marines.

Caught off balance by the unexpected arrival of the marines, a Somali interviewed on BBC's Network Africa was of the opinion that the Americans were after our beautiful women. I take it that his response is that of a weakling of a man feeling powerless when confronted with the powers of another man's virility. Another held the view that every Somali would be converted to Christianity. To what end?

Overwhelmed as I am with the magnitude of the crisis, I say this: Somalia is an open sore, a wound gaping as wide as a gate on broken hinges, a mouth toothless and without a tongue, ugly in the extreme, cavernous, tomblike.

Maybe it would be wise to wait until the waste has been dealt with, the running sore has been stopped, the famished have been fed, the sick healed, the malnourished rehabilitated, and only then speak.

I'm coming round to the wisdom to be courteous to those who have been generous, a wisdom cautioning me to wait and see how things develop on the ground before piping the praise of the marines who are performing sanctimonious acts of Christian kindness (Christian in the secondary, secular meaning of the term), who, days after landing with only a tiny force, have made much difference to the balance of power among the thugs -- the marines who have executed their jobs well, jobs as clean as anesthesia

Wisdom informs me that the marines are not in Somalia to do a plumbing job; they are there risking their lives to confront the notorious marauders of Mogadishu, Kismayu and Baidoa, wicked men who tuck into a cheek the stimulant khat and are on wings, who get high on other drugs, who are stone-deaf to death, to the muezzin's preaching of Islamic morality, to the traditional notions of clanly co-existence.

For what this is worth, I support the marines' strict ban on the importing of khat, which hardly contributes to the well-being of the populace; the ban is essential to the peacemaking efforts under way.

No doubt there are things to quibble about -- American ways of conducting the affair; their general behavior, which one might find fault with; their attitudes, which are probably highly unpardonable. They say, don't they, that one must not look a gift horse in the mouth for fear of what one might see. After all, one may not approve of the gift or the one who has given it.

It is show time now, and December is here, so turn on your CNN, ABC, BBC and Voice of America, kick off your shoes, put up your feet and relax.

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*"Praise the Marines? I suppose so" was proposed by Nuruddin Farah in memory of his meeting with André Viola the year he wrote this text and they both discussed this issue central to post-colonial problematics.*

