

Review - Somalia: The New Barbary?

Written by Abdi Ismail Samatar

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Somalia: The New Barbary? Piracy and Islam in the Horn of Africa

By: Martin N. Murphy

London: Hurst & Company, 2010.

The principal aim of the author is to inform policy makers in the West about the causes, nature and dynamics of piracy off the Somali coast, and to provide what he considers a more logically and cost effective way of dealing with the matter. Murphy's book is divided into 28 chapters that attempt to cover Somali political history and culture, the relationship between piracy and state failure, Islam and Islamic movement, and many other topics. The author endeavors to summarize such diverse topics about Somalia and piracy in 180 pages. Most chapters can be standalone commentaries and the author does not try to provide a conceptual framework that can turn the diverse narratives into a coherent story. Murphy relies on two sources for much of the information used in the book. His major source is his earlier book entitled *Small Boat, Weak States, Dirty Money: Piracy Maritime Terrorism in the Modern World* (2009). In addition, he excessively relies on existing literature on Somalia and Islamic movements to tell the story and the problems of the country. Given the numeracy of the topics covered in the book I will not attempt to cover most of them, but select a few chapters that are representative of his mode of argumentation: Somali politics and culture; nature of the piracy; relationship between Islamic movements and piracy, and the nature of Somalis.

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Politics and culture: Murphy is not a student of Somalia and has not done work in the country. Nevertheless, he forays into subjects in which he knows very little about and thus relies on existing literature to make unfounded claims. For instance, the chapters 2, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 are all very thin (3 to 5 pages long) and simply repeat what some other scholars have said. A classic example of this is the chapter entitled “A Clan-Based Society.” Here the author repeats what the British Social Anthropologist, Lewis, has told the world about Somalis, and Murphy does not see the value of looking at different writings of Somali politics and culture. He thus reproduces colonial analysis of Somali society. The chapter is two and half pages long and adds nothing of value to what we already know about the country.

Nature of Piracy: This subject should have been the easiest for the author to deal with, but unfortunately, he starts the discussion from the empirically wrong claim that “state failure, however, is not a piracy prerequisite” (1). Unfortunately, data from all sources, including those of the International Maritime Organization show that piracy did not exist along the Somali coast when the country had a government. In fact, this is the only place, among the five major piracy regions in the world where piracy appeared after the state collapsed. In addition, Murphy dismisses, like so many Western analysts, the fact that fish pirates, such as Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian, etc. who ply Somali waters take the biggest loot in the form of Somali fish (Samatar, Lindberg, Mahayni, 2011). It was these fish pirates that opened the gates for the ransom pirates which Murphy and others dread.

Islam and Piracy: Murphy’s discussion of this topic is the most perplexing. The very brief chapter on this topic shows that no relationship exists between the Islamic movements, including Al-Shabaab, and pirates. Nonetheless, the author insinuates that there might be relationship between the two (Chapter 13 & 14). In addition, he repeats another claim which has never been substantiated about the way piracy money reaches its supposed destinations such as the Somali enclave in Nairobi (121). Making such a claim is irresponsible as similar journalistic assertions have provided pretexts for the Kenyan and other authorities to harass legitimate Somali investors in Kenya and as far South Africa.

Nature of Somalis: The author, in his effort to appear as an expert on Somalia, Islam, and Piracy homogenizes Somalis as the prototype of uncivilized and tribalist natives. By essentializing the Somali as clanists and irrational, he demonstrates that he is ill equipped to introduce the topic to a wide, but educated, audience. There is not a single chapter in the volume, which can stand rigorous scholar scrutiny. Given the poor scholarly quality of the book and its superficial analysis I wonder what drove the publisher to produce this book. It appears that the publisher might have considered the combination of Islam and piracy in the title of a potential winner given the current global political climate. Unfortunately, this book is neither a worthy introduction to piracy and Islam in Somalia, nor does it provide new material or analysis for the trained eye. *Somalia: The New Barbary? Piracy, Islam in the Horn of Africa* is a neo-colonial rendering of the issues and as such is not a worthy read.

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