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## **Djibouti's rapprochement with the West against the backdrop of a regional power shift**

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The three-day state visit of Djibouti President Ismail Omar Guelleh in Paris (Feb. 28 until March 2) was the first of its kind in ten years.<sup>1</sup> While Guelleh had travelled to Paris in 2013 as part of a France-African summit, and again in 2015 for the COP21 global environment conference, he had not been invited officially by the Elysée presidential palace for over a decade. This latest visit of Guelleh, held just two months before the French presidential elections with Hollande as a lame-duck president, indicates a certain reluctance by French authorities to reinvest themselves in French-Djibouti relations, or at least not on a personal level.

Guelleh has been in power since 1999 and is now in his fourth term of office. The latest elections, held in 2016, were disputed, and he was criticized by the opposition for suppressing free speech and for violating human rights. This has been a source of discomfort for President Hollande in his relations with Djibouti's president, and thus the Guelleh state visit included no formal speeches and no joint press conference at the Elysée.

In contrast, Guelleh's 2014 journey to the White House included all the pomp and circumstance traditionally accompanied by state visits of important allies. President Obama publicly thanked

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Bensimon, "Le président djiboutien Ismaël Omar Guelleh en visite de rattrapage à Paris", *Le Monde*, 28 February 2017. Accessed 15 March 2017. [http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/02/28/le-president-djiboutien-ismael-omar-guelleh-en-visite-officielle-a-paris\\_5086716\\_3212.html#0TGy7PwcOdWRmo7i.99](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/02/28/le-president-djiboutien-ismael-omar-guelleh-en-visite-officielle-a-paris_5086716_3212.html#0TGy7PwcOdWRmo7i.99)

his Djiboutian counterpart for hosting the only full-scale American military base in Africa, the formerly French Camp Lemonnier, which was inaugurated in September 2002 and which was granted to the United States for a new 20-year lease.<sup>2</sup> In 2015, exactly one year subsequent to Guelleh's Washington visit, Secretary of State John Kerry visited Djibouti and Camp Lemonnier.

Indeed, this dynamic, with French reluctance on the one hand and American enthusiasm on the other, reflects the changes that Djibouti has underwent since the end of its civil war in 2001, and since the rise of Jihadist groups on the African continent and globally. With extreme Islam gaining ground in Africa, the war against Jihadist groups in the continent has become a priority for the West. In this article, I will focus on the consequences for Djibouti of this campaign – both in the Horn of Africa region and on the continental level. How did Djibouti's leadership manage to transform the country into an international hub for the battle against terror and piracy?

### **Djibouti's geopolitically strong location**

Situated on the Horn of Africa, Djibouti achieved its independence from France in 1977, some 15 years after France's other former African colonies. With an area of only 23,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it is one of the smallest states on the continent. Despite this fact, its territorial position is of utmost importance for understanding the challenges that it currently faces. Djibouti borders Eritrea, landlocked Ethiopia and Somalia, and is critically placed directly opposite the Yemen coast and the Arabian Peninsula; the Gulf of Tadjoura (at the crossroads of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden) delineates its maritime boundaries.

From the point of view of the United States and Europe, Djibouti plays an irreplaceable role for both regional and continental security. Domestically, it has been able to maintain its own stability and continuity of governance, no mean feat for such a small country surrounded by unstable neighbors. The fact that a majority of Djibouti's population is of Somali ethnic origin only adds to this achievement; 2,500 Djibouti soldiers – a third of the army's troops – are

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<sup>2</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, President Barack Obama, *Remarks by President Obama and President Guelleh of Djibouti before Bilateral Meeting*, 5 May 2014. Accessed 15 March 2017. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/05/remarks-president-obama-and-president-guelleh-djibouti-bilateral-meeting>

actively taking part in the AMISOM African Union peacekeeping mission in Somalia, and have suffered casualties as a result. On the continental level, Djibouti serves as an operational and intelligence gathering center against extreme Islamist expansion in the Horn of Africa and beyond. Djibouti's location on the Bab el-Mandeb strait - the gateway to the Suez Canal, the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean - offers a strategic control point over one of the world's busiest shipping routes (some 20 percent of global shipping commerce passes annually through this route). The importance of this route also makes it an attractive target for pirates, mostly originating from Somalia. In an effort to combat such activity, European maritime patrol and reconnaissance units (MPRA) are stationed with their support elements in Djibouti, as part of the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR) Operation Atalanta.<sup>3</sup> Djibouti is also taking in refugees from the civil war in Yemen. According to a January 2017 report, 36,603 persons had fled Yemen to Djibouti since March 2015.<sup>4</sup> This represents a substantial humanitarian effort for a country of less than one million people.

### **Evolution of French and American presence in Djibouti**

Independent Djibouti had served for many years as the French army's main headquarters outside of France, with the largest number of French troops stationed there outside (not counting special missions, like Operation Serval in Mali). During his July 2015 visit to Djibouti, French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian affirmed that the number of French soldiers deployed in the country guarantees the preservation of French aerial, terrestrial and naval capabilities in the region in the long term. Despite this, French military interventions on the eastern side of the continent, together with critical budgetary reductions, have forced the defense ministry to reduce the French military presence in Djibouti and elsewhere. Thus, 1450 troops were stationed in Djibouti in August 2016, down from almost 2,000 the previous year.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the military-

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<sup>3</sup> Dan de Luce, "Why Is It So Hard to Stop West Africa's Vicious Pirates?" *Foreign Policy*, 23 September 2016. Accessed 15 March 2017. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/23/the-world-beat-somali-pirates-why-cant-it-stop-west-african-piracy/>

<sup>4</sup> "Mixed Migration in the Horn of Africa & Yemen Region," Danish Refugee Council and the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, January 2017. Accessed 15 March 2017. <http://regionalmms.org/monthlysummary/RMMS%20Mixed%20Migration%20Monthly%20Summary%20January%202017.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> République française, "Les Forces Françaises Stationnées à Djibouti," État-major des armées, Ministère de la Défense, 20 September 2016. Accessed 16 March 2017. <http://www.defense.gouv.fr/english/ema/forces-repositionnees/djibouti/dossier/les-forces-francaises-stationnees-a-djibouti>

maritime presence is viewed as more essential to the French than the large-scale deployment of ground forces.

But while the number of French soldiers in Djibouti keeps declining, the number of other foreign troops there keeps growing. According to the US Department of Defense, some 2,000 service members (4,000 military and civilians) are assigned at any one time to the Camp Lemonnier Combined Joint Task Force.<sup>6</sup> It is from this base that the American army coordinates UAV and other intelligence missions against al-Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria and al-Qaeda in Yemen and elsewhere.

The massive American military presence there is not necessarily perceived by the French as competition over influence; France considers Djibouti as an ally and strategic partner, but realizes that it cannot be everywhere in Africa all the time. Thus, it has chosen to focus its efforts in combat zones like northern Mali, leaving Djibouti, at least partially, to the Americans, the Spanish and the Italians.

### **Other foreign players in Djibouti**

The stability of Djibouti cannot be attributed solely to President Guelleh, but to a large extent to Djibouti society and its aspirations to coexist peacefully with its neighbors. Nevertheless, Guelleh can be credited for creating the right platform to attract foreign powers. Guelleh has created in Djibouti a perfect economic-development cycle. The more he opens his country to foreign military powers, the more foreign investments pour in. In turn, the country becomes more stable politically, thus drawing more foreign investments.

The new Djibouti of the last fifteen years has indeed gotten the attention of several world powers, apart from the US and France. We have already mentioned the presence of Atalanta

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<sup>6</sup> Jim Garamone, Defense Media Activity, U.S Department of Defense, “Dunford Says U.S., Coalition Must Put Continuous Pressure on ISIL”, *U.S Department of Defense*, 6 December 2015. Accessed 6 March 2015. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/632998/dunford-says-us-coalition-must-put-continuous-pressure-on-isil>

forces in Djibouti – mostly troops from the UK, Spain and Italy. The two other principal new actors on the Djibouti scene are the Gulf countries and China.<sup>7</sup>

The growing presence of Gulf countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), is closely linked to the war in Yemen. The UAE, and also Bahrain, invest in development projects, while Saudi Arabia is a prominent donor for the absorption of Yemenite refugees, and additionally finances housing, schools, and mosques for poor Djiboutians. Beyond such largesse, Saudi Arabia is also currently negotiating the construction of its own military base in Djibouti, designed to enlarge Saudi regional influence. In truth, Sunni-Muslim Djibouti makes a natural strategic partner to Sunni Saudi Arabia, and is itself a member of the Arab League.

The Chinese presence in Djibouti must be considered through a different prism. As the issue of China's presence in Africa has been the focus of much analysis, I will refer here to just two interesting aspects of the growing Chinese influence on Djibouti and its neighbors.<sup>8</sup> The first is the Chinese financed and constructed rail road linking landlocked Ethiopia with the port of Djibouti. The second is the decision made to construct in Djibouti the first Chinese military base beyond the South China Sea.

The Chinese military presence in Djibouti is a new regional and even global factor which the French and other European powers must cope with. The Europeans have frequently cooperated with the Americans in Africa, such as in the search for the missing Chibok girls (abducted in 2014 by extreme Islam terror group Boko Haram) in Nigeria,<sup>9</sup> but working side by side with Chinese military forces is unexplored territory.

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Braude and Tyler Jiang, "Why China and Saudi Arabia Are Building Bases in Djibouti", *The World Post*, 26 September 2016. Accessed 15 March 2017. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-braude/why-china-and-saudi-arabi\\_b\\_12194702.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/joseph-braude/why-china-and-saudi-arabi_b_12194702.html)

<sup>8</sup> Dana Sanchez, "China Financing Most of Djibouti's \$14.4 Billion in Planned Infrastructure Projects," *AFK Insider*, 11 June 2015. <http://afkinsider.com/97963/china-financing-most-of-djiboutis-14-4b-in-planned-infrastructure-projects/>

<sup>9</sup> Department for International Development and Foreign & Commonwealth Office, Government of the United Kingdom, "UK's continued support to Nigeria in the fight against Boko Haram", *GOV.UK*, 14 April 2016. Accessed 17 March 2017. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uks-continued-support-to-nigeria-in-the-fight-against-boko-haram>

President Guelleh has leveraged well the threats posed by jihadist groups and pirates, but his receptiveness to the United States and China does not entail a desire to see the French military depart altogether. In an interview to the *Jeune Afrique* journal in 2015, Guelleh lamented that Djibouti had been abandoned by France.<sup>10</sup> From Guelleh's point of view, the presence of French military forces guarantees the continuity of his regime. It is uncertain if France is indeed willing to continue playing this role, and the issue will surely be reviewed by the next French president. On the other hand, Guelleh might turn to the Americans or even to the Chinese, if he feels that Paris isn't ready to deliver.

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<sup>10</sup> Francois Soudan, "Djibouti - Ismaïl Omar Guelleh: 'La France ne nous considère pas'", *Jeune Afrique*, 12 February 2015. Accessed 19 March 2017. <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/225444/politique/djibouti-ismael-omar-guelleh-la-france-ne-nous-consid-re-pas/>