

Patrick FERRAS made his entire military career as an intelligence officer in the French Air Force within Air Force Units and Joint Headquarters. He took part in numerous foreign operations: Chad, Central African Republic, Ex-Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia and Djibouti. He ended his military career at the French Headquarters in Djibouti. He was in charge of the Intelligence and International Relations Office. Holder of a doctorate in Geopolitics, he is the director of the Observatory of the Horn of Africa and a lecturer (University of Bordeaux 4, Mäqäle (Ethiopia), Political Science Institute in Bordeaux, Strategic International Relations Institute in Paris and the Chamber of Trade and Industry).

## **DJIBOUTI, BETWEEN OPPORTUNISM AND REALISM: EMERGING STRATEGIC PIVOT IN THE HORN**

By the light of recent events (the attack against the restaurant *La Chaumière* in May 2014 and the massive influx of refugees from Yemen for several weeks), the name of the small Republic of Djibouti regularly appears in articles and comments from journalists. Djibouti's President since 1999, Ismaël Omar Guelleh has played an important role in the recognition of his country abroad and the strategic nature of its geographical position. In this article, I will first focus on the emergence and evolution of the Republic of Djibouti by analyzing its major assets and analyze the reasons for a strong foreign presence which give to Djibouti the status of the most important city- military garrison in Africa.

### **Djibouti: a partner that has become essential**

The Republic of Djibouti covers 23,000 km<sup>2</sup> and has a population estimated at 800,000 inhabitants. Independent since 1977, it has maintained since that date its strategic value for France that remains bound by a defense agreement. The year 2001 appears to be the pivotal year for Djibouti. The attacks of the eleventh of September and the launching of the Global War on Terror by the United States (US) made Djibouti a location sought by all the powers involved in this new model of conflict. Very quickly, a US base took shape alongside the long-standing French presence.

The conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which was only temporarily ended by the Algiers Agreements in December 2000, has led to a situation of “*neither peace nor war*” between the two countries. Aware that the situation will continue, Ethiopia turned to Djibouti for its imports and exports. To date, 85% of Ethiopian trades goes through the port of Djibouti. By opening up to foreign operators (Dubai) the new port of Doraleh, has become the most modern platform in the region. It has allowed trade between the Arabian Peninsula, the Horn of Africa and the Indian Ocean<sup>1</sup>. The international role of Djibouti is linked to the responsiveness and opportunism of Ismaël Omar Guelleh who has integrated his country in the fight against terrorism by providing a secure rear base. The port is also significant to the country's economic development. Since the summit of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA), which was hosted in 2006, Djibouti would wish to become the entry point of the trade of this organization member countries<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 90 % of global trade is conducted by sea. Ports are key nodes in this huge network.

<sup>2</sup> COMESA has 19 members including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Djibouti, Sudan, South Sudan, Uganda and Kenya.

## **France-Djibouti: an older couple that shows signs of weakness**

The 1977 defense agreement and then the Defense Cooperation Treaty signed in 2011 confirmed the strategic role of Djibouti to France. This last mentioned text specified in its preamble that "*the French presence on Djibouti territory meets the common will of the French Republic and the Republic of Djibouti.*" Its main objective is the defense cooperation to contribute to a sustainable peace and security on their territory (Art. 2). Article 4 underlined that the parties will regularly exchange views, analyses and information about the risks and potential threats to the Republic of Djibouti. In case of threat, the parties will evaluate the situation and the measures to be taken for the defense of Djibouti. In this context, France is supporting the strengthening of the Djibouti Armed Forces (by cooperation) and the French Forces stationed in Djibouti (FFDJ) benefit from operational facilities<sup>3</sup>. The financial commitment of France with regard to Djibouti for the presence of FFDJ is a fixed annual contribution of 30 million euros. The strategic interest for France and Djibouti is clear. Approximately 2,000 soldiers are deployed to Djibouti. They serve a large number of air, ground and naval assets<sup>4</sup>. Due to budget restrictions and the priority of the "Barkhane" operation<sup>5</sup>, the format of FFDJ could rapidly decrease and be around a little more 1,300 people. Nevertheless, Djibouti remains the largest French military installation abroad.

## **Americans in Djibouti: an advanced system of observation and intervention in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula**

Since 2002, the US has settled near the French forces near the airport but are also present on the Chabelley airport (south of Djibouti) which has become the base for the drones that conduct missions against Al-Qaeda terrorists in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). In a few years, the US contingent has more than doubled, exceeding the French contingent and the means deployed are considerable. In less than ten years, the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF HOA) has evolved from a light structure of headquarters to a military base equipped with modern and offensive assets<sup>6</sup>. The CJTF-HOA depends on the US Command for Africa, whose main headquarters is located in Stuttgart (Federal Republic of Germany). The mission of this US Command for Africa is "*to protect and defend the national security interests of the United States by Strengthening the defense capabilities of African states and regional organisms and, when directed, conducts military operations, in order to deter and defeat transnational threats and to Provide a security environment Conducive to good governance and development*". The CJTF-HOA is the only permanent US military presence in Africa. This military base costs \$ 38 million. It was re-evaluated since the visit of Ismaël Omar Guelleh in the US in 2014. The US plans to stay in Djibouti for a long time. The doubling of the rent points to both the commitment and US needs on the Djiboutian territory. Africa is not a strategic priority for the US<sup>7</sup> and is generally understood as a peripheral space

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<sup>3</sup> Air base, barracks, communications, troop's movement, security of the military establishments.

<sup>4</sup> Mainly, an infantry regiment, seven fighters (Mirage 2000), a detachment of Army helicopters (Gazelle and Puma), helicopter and cargo aircrafts from the Air Force (Puma, C160 Transall), two light transport boats.

<sup>5</sup> A counter-terrorism force intended to fight against Terrorism in Sahel countries.

<sup>6</sup> Including drones. The troops are more than 2 000.

<sup>7</sup> Papers from the Strategic Research Institute of the Military School, *La Stratégie américaine en Afrique*, Maya Kandel, December 2014.

for American power<sup>8</sup>. But, its importance has been revised upward and if the *Light Footprint*<sup>9</sup> must remain minimal, it requires some support points. Djibouti is one of these main points<sup>10</sup>.

### **Djibouti: an international garrison**

Along with the US and France, other smaller foreign contingents from Japan, Germany and Spain -based in Djibouti have contributed to the fight against terrorism and piracy. The facilities of the port of Djibouti and the French presence have allowed a significant logistical support to various naval operations (International, European and Nato). Djibouti has become in a few years an international garrison near two regions in crisis (Yemen, Somalia) and through international shipping routes vital for European and Asian economies. The stability of Djibouti offers foreign partners in international or regional coalitions and in a very turbulent Horn of Africa transit facilities, major support points. Djibouti with its capacities to deliver humanitarian aid in the region and recently in Yemen plays a major geopolitical role that all international actors have understood. China's plan to have military facilities in Djibouti has confirmed the strategic military status of the small country<sup>11</sup>. Rents paid by the various countries which maintain their military assets in Djibouti stress the opportunism of the current head of state faced with present strategic realities.

### **Conclusion**

The Republic of Djibouti is a sentinel keeping watch over the Red Sea, the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa. Capitalizing on an exceptional location, the current head of state has managed to attract investments to develop its economy and to focus his central strategy on the port of Djibouti. The stability of this small country offers its partners support points to deploy military assets involved in international missions. Three countries provide Djibouti insurance against current risks and threats. France and the US deter external aggression. Finally, Ethiopia would never accept a situation of chaos in a such a friendly country ensuring the transit of its vital imports and exports. After two decades of French protection, Djibouti has diversified its relations and has established itself as an active member of the international community. The opportunism of its president playing competition and continually seeking new partners has given Djibouti an increased strategic role. The recent visits of the Turkish President and the US Secretary of State provide sufficient evidence. US, France and China have invested in Djibouti. Djibouti is not a French backyard for a long time. France and US are allied but their missions are completely different (Defense agreement / GWOT). China has played an economical role and its foreign policy is not to establish large military points in Africa. Despite the attack in May 2014, Djibouti has managed in the last decade to "rent" its strategic position and attract new investors. It remains one of the few African countries to have been able to manage and master this comparative advantage.

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<sup>8</sup> Paper from the Thomas More Institute, May 31, 2015, Antonin Tisseron.

<sup>9</sup> US Concept in Africa.

<sup>10</sup> According to Maya Kandel, Africa is the laboratory of the new approach called Light Footprint (p. 13).

<sup>11</sup> « China plans to open a military base in Djibouti to benefit from the exceptional strategic position of this country in the Gulf of Aden and to find a place among the international maritime powers present in this area. (Africa Agency, May 15, 2015).