

Djibouti: A Jewel on the Horn: A Nation's Challenges and Opportunities

Part I

By Faisal A. Roble

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Xeebtaa Jabuutee, Soomaali laga xaday, haddii aan Xagaa Tagay; Xeer ma'aan Jabin, ee maxaa la iigu soo xidhay? Maxamed Mooge, erayadii abwaan Cabdi Qays

INTRODUCTION

What makes Djibouti transform itself from what was otherwise a desert city-state located on volcanic lava to one of the most dynamic societies in the Horn of Africa? Sheer ingenuity and hard work by its leaders is the obvious answer. Not too long ago, the people of Djibouti were synonymous with tough warriors and impenetrable Somali and Afar clans with a negative stigma attached to them (those who had tortured John Speck in 1885, a fellow traveler of Sir. Richard Burton)¹. Today, however, Djiboutians are considered to be people of significant diversity, liberal Islamic culture and business acumen so much so that their city could be described as no less than a “Jewel on the Horn of Africa.”

Despite that I was born in a place only about 170 miles to the southwest of Djibouti, I hadn't had the opportunity in the past to visit this Red Sea city-state prior to the week of December 15-23, 2011. As a matter of fact, during the French rule in Djibouti (complimented by the draconian immigration policies under the rule of Hiale Sellasie over the Somalis in the eastern regions), visiting the “French Somaliland Territory,” as it was known, was as nearly impossible as New York.



It is precisely because of this type of historical dislocation and dismemberment of the Somalis that nearly every Somali of my age would remember exactly what each was doing and where on the day Djibouti became independent. (In my case, I was on a hood of a lorry – that is “Sabbax” - somewhere between Galkayo and Dusemareeb on my way to Mogadishu to join Lafole, Faculty of Education.) The unfolding events at the time (Djibouti getting its independence and my abandoning of the struggle for the liberation of Western Somali) gave me the blues. Moreover, I was feeling down at the sheer uncertainty associated with facing the unknown in Mogadishu. Along with other travelers from Hargaisa, I remember singing with them in unison “Xamar waa Jiqee Jirjirbaad ka Gali.” Indeed, I found my little corner in Mogadishu until I left it in 1981 for the United States of America).

Nearly 34 years after independence, despite retardation in development, I was positively struck by how good the Djibouti society and its political leaders have it together so far.

My short visit to Djibouti addressed my personal, political and professional yearnings for the country and the region in general. Personal it was, because my father’s mom was born in the outlying villages of Djibouti over a century ago, and as such it was a subject my late father always talked to us about. For years, I held on to some of these stories tightly and carried with me fond memories of distant relatives living afar; I never ceased being curious about the inner workings of Djibouti both as a city and as a multi-cultural society.

The visit also helped me evaluate some Political views that I held for some time now; Djibouti and its leadership have shown significant magnanimity towards the Somali people and their

sufferings. Also, Djibouti has become the home for the salvation of Somali arts and culture. For those reasons alone, I wanted to converse in person with my Djiboutian brethren. To be exact, I wasn't disappointed on both accounts!

The pain felt across the society in Djibouti towards the self inflicted destruction of neighboring Somalia is deeper than I thought. Walking in the over-crowded streets of the city, I often encountered many Somali refugees who sought safety and shelter here, at which I was reminded of the sanctuary that Djibouti had been for so many years, thus Abdi Adan Qays' lyrics and Mohammed Mooge's delicious voice: *Xeebtaa Jabuutee, Soomali Laga Xaday, Hidii aan Xagaa tagay, Xeer Ma'an Jibin Ee Maxaa La igu Soo Xidhay?*

In the arts and cultural front, I was exposed to many Somali traditional songs modernized to my delight by Djiboutian singers. A case in point is "Hariimatee Hana Habo;" Mohamoud Tukale's "Ducaysane Wiilkaygow," the Galbis song of "Waa todobadiiye tagina maynee hadaan timir lana siin....." or Sangub's Dhannto. Once you hear these songs with a powerful drum, you would definitely come to the unavoidable conclusion this: If Reggae music originated in any part of Africa, it would be in the Somali culture, possibly rooted in Dhanto, Afarley, Ruquusa and others.

And finally, it was a visit that not only satisfied but also augmented my professional interest (Urban and Regional economic integration of the Horn) in doing some future planning/development work in the region (more on this subject in an upcoming Part II, especially the potential economic development that the Djibouti-Diredhaba and Djibouti- Jigjiga corridors can afford). There is already significant economic integration taking place within the Horn of Africa region, and Djibouti is the engine that derives this emerging market.

TOLARENT SOCIETY IN A TOUGH NEIGHBORHOOD

With a land area of 23,000 sq km, a coastal line of 20 sq km and no known agricultural or forest land, Djibouti has some of the undiscovered beauty of nature in the middle of arid land. For example, Las Assal, known as the vast salt lake, has an elevation of -150 meter below sea level, second only to the Dead Sea Depression; Las Abbe' offers unique salt bubbles shaped in crystal form. Add to that the unexpected beauty of nature in the middle of dry land, "Goda Mountains" which "rise like a green surprise in the northwest of this otherwise sun-bleached land."ⁱⁱ

Djibouti could be both a geographic paradox and a tourist paradise at the same time. It eloquently represents nature's contradictions. Even so, its challenges come from somewhere

else: they come from the sociopolitical turmoil associated with its location – that it is located in a tough and troubled neighborhood called the Horn of Africa.

To the north of Djibouti is the newly pariah state of Eritria ruled by an autocrat, Isayas Afewarke; to the east is the highly strategic water ways of Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, two warm waters that have always commanded attention from world powers; to the Southeast lies the failed state of Somalia; to the South is the Somali National State of Ethiopia (Dawled Goboleedka Soomalida Itoobiya); and to the West is Ethiopia proper, a land often compared to Russia in terms of both being “prisons of nations” and archaic feudal culture.

Las Assal depression has one of the largest Salt Deposit



Crystal salt at Las Abbe’





Paradox of nature,
Goda Mountains

Indeed a troubled region it is, where conflicts are and had been in the past more common than peace itself, and where the region's political and historical troubles go back to the days of Imam Ahmed Guray (Ahmed Al Gazali) and his historical confrontations with the Christian

king of Abyssinia (Libna Dingle). In the early parts of the 1900s, conflicts between Europeans penetrating and occupying Somali territories and fierce opposition by the Somalis were the main culprit in the conflict (Seventeen Trips to Somaliland, Major Swayne).

Between the 1940s through the 1970s (including the historic war between Ethiopia and Somalia over the liberation of Western Somalia -1977through 1978), wars for self determination of the Somali people gripped the region. Since 1990s, the pariah state of Eritria on the one hand and the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) on the other, have been the sources for instability in the region. Eritria invaded and still continues to occupy Djiboutian territory on the northern tip of the country without clear sovereignty. Add to these the war of liberation by the Ogaden National Liberation Front (ONLF) in the eastern edges of Ethiopia and you get devastating conflicts which had run amok in the region.

The population of Djibouti is comprised of 2 main ethnic groups. The larger group is the Somali population, which is estimated at 60 percent of the total population, closely followed by the Afar, estimated at 35 percent. The remaining 5 percent are mainly broken into Arabs, Somalis from the Somali Region of Ethiopia, small number of Ethiopians and Europeans. Both the Somali and the Afar are followers of the Sunni Muslim and speak related Cushitic languages. As a matter of fact, nearly all Afar urbanites speak Somali. French and Arabic as the official languages are widely spoken by all sectors of the society.ⁱⁱⁱ

PEACE, ISLAM AND POLITICAL STABILITY

The most impressive aspect about Djibouti is the immense peace and coexistence that seems to have transpired for the last 20 years. With the exception of minor jolts, the 1993-94 internal strife caused by an Afar opposition group and a recent minor youth riot in the middle of 2011, perhaps inspired by the “Arab Spring,” the country has been admirably peaceful. As impossible as it appears to have peace and Islam to coexist in the region, at least for now, Djibouti is spared. In the streets of the city, one feels the aura of peace and the freedom associated with secure borders.

In an authoritative article “Djibouti's President Guelleh: - A giant among Dwarfs,” April 19, 2011, Abdikarim H. Abdi Buh, a contributing editor of Wardhernews assess the political standing of President Ismael Omar Geulleh in the following:

“The Afars who constitute around 35% of the total population, the Arabs and the other minorities see President Ismail as a strong and unifying president that the country can hardly afford to dump at this juncture. The President has the International Community and the regional powers on his side and above all is locally attributed to have saved the country from total imminent collapse during his term in office.”

Fully endorsing the contributions by the President, Buh goes on to say:

“President Guelleh took over in 1999 a bankrupt country, a country in the midst of civil war, country encircled by bad and predatory neighbors, a barren country with no natural resources and in a relatively short period of time turned it into the only oasis of peace in the region. An oasis where both the region's troubled citizens and the international community feel at ease to do business – Djibouti is the banker and trade hub of the horn. Sizable majority of Djiboutian admit that they have no alternative in place at the moment and they also reiterate that a President shouldn't be judged by the number of years he was in Office but rather by what he has achieved in the said time.”

Time and again, I was told that much of the credit for maintaining a stable government goes both to the leaders of the country and to its citizenry for their collective recognition and appreciation of peace. More often than not, I heard from all sectors of the society that President Ismael Omar Gelleuh gets most of the credit for this achievement: In an otherwise turbulent region, he comes across as the sage and wiser leader, and lately became a good listener to progressive and productive advises from his community.

In the last cabinet arrangement, for example, he has replaced the older, post-independence generation with a younger, more educated and business oriented class, most of whom mustered a healthy dose of Western education.

If this trend of coexistence between peace and Islam in a politically stable environment were to continue, then Djibouti can be to the Horn of Africa what Turkey is to Eurasia.

Peace, Islam and political stability are all possible only because the country's citizenry seems to have collectively endorsed a peaceful and non-violent Muslim faith, exactly as the Prophet intended it to be. Radical Islam is not tolerated while Sunni Islam is a big part of the life of the average Djiboutian. Djibouti, therefore, is defiantly both peaceful and a Muslim country, where Al-Qaida or the works of Al-Shabab are combated.

Nearly everyone in the middle class, with whom I interacted, prays regularly. During prayer times (five times a day), for example, the city's landscape is colored by groups of residents lined up in an orderly fashion behind one Imam and commit themselves to their daily prayers. They do so in groups as large as 40 at times and as small as 10 people-committing themselves to Allah one prayer at a time anywhere and everywhere in the city; this is repeated at least five times daily along major boulevards, near business offices and by retail store fronts.

In addition to unadulterated practice of peaceful Islam, the citizens of Djibouti are equally much aware of their asset in peace. To their credit, the community consciously and decidedly protects and preserves peace as much as Western countries protect natural assets and national land marks.

That is not a small feat! For a country with the size of Djibouti, a mere 170 square kilo meter, to have achieved the most expensive and illusive commodity in this tough and rough region of Horn of Africa – a long term and a lasting peace so far - is by all accounts admirable!

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A TRAVELER

I arrived in Djibouti on a breezy and brisk Tuesday night at about 10 PM in mid December, 2011. The month of December offers the best one can have in this otherwise hot and humid city. The temperature never registered beyond 85 degrees throughout my stay, often with a fresh ocean breeze blowing off shore by mid afternoon. For someone from the cold country like me, this calm and comfortable weather gave me the opportunity to enjoy and experience much on foot, so as to be able to discover the beauty of alleys and narrow streets an ancient city like Djibouti can offer.

At my initial contact with Djiboutian guardsmen at the airport, I could not help but be reminded of John Le Carre's fictional accounts and his portrayal of this seaside city as the epitome of a worldwide espionage. No sooner than I acquainted myself with the residents did I learn that Le Carre's accounts were nothing but the work of a mere Euro-centric fiction account of a peaceful and beautiful African city. The reality that I encountered and the open arms with which Djiboutian welcome a fellow Somali like myself seem to have nothing in common with the stories we often received from the likes of John Le Carre'.

My first encounter with Somali speaking immigration officers for nearly 26 years, last time being when I visited the pre-war Mogadishu in 1986, was a scene that I murmured to myself: "this is a typical Somali behavior." The typical anarchy known to Somalis – customers jamming small offices, papers flying all over to a point where a visitor like me starts worrying about the potential of losing documents and not being sure whether s/he is being charged the right amount of fee – all greeted me in one. Although unpleasant this scene was, just like any immigration office (even in the West where immigration queues are gruesome and torturing, as it is in Los Angeles, where the minimum time to see an immigration officer is 3 hours), Djibouti officers were friendly and magnanimous; especially they were so when one considers that I cleared off the immigration in 30 minutes. The immigration is also equipped with the latest anti terrorism technology gadgets.

What I have seen in those 30 minutes at the immigration is a typical chaos of similar institutions in the continent and is easily correctible with some procedural changes. With visionary and strict guidelines implemented by supervisors who would play by the letter of the law, I am sure it can easily be fixed.

A word of consolation: Once I and my fellow Ethiopian as peace delegates, things eased off. The Ethiopian fellow, the young brother of the late Dr. Kiflle Wadaje (whereas Dr. Wadaje was a former foreign Minister of Ethiopia and a constitutional scholar), was amazed how easily I communicated with my Somali Djiboutian brothers as opposed to his outsidership. His misplaced notion that both Ethiopian highlanders and Somalis like myself are at an equal footing when it comes to Djibouti and its people was quickly shattered right in front of my eyes.

Most impressive than anything I encountered was the longing my Ethiopian friend had for a simple touch of the warm waters of the Red Sea. Once we deposited our luggage in our hotel room, he asked me if I could accompany him to the front line of the Sea. We walked down there. He asked me if he could sit on the edge of the water with his bare feet soaked and his legs

up to his knees completely immersed in the salty water of the sea. He quietly and transcendently sat there for over forty minutes, looking up to the heavens and feeling a sense of affinity with the ever illusive waters of the Red Sea. He momentarily conquered the unconquerable waters of the Somalis.

For the next few days that I was with him and other delegates from the greater region of the Horn (including delegated from north and southern Sudan, Ethiopia, and Eretria) they all were alarmed by the degree with which I felt Djibouti to be as much home as my own birth place. Through the typical Somali ‘family tree finding,’ or “tooyasho,” within the first day, I found a cousin who is a supervisor at the very Sheraton we stayed. Once he identified me as “Ina Cabdi Rooble,” it was a matter of hours after another cousin who is a colonel in the Djibouti army showed up at the Sheraton, with his uniform intact. The rest is history!

The reception I was afforded by high ranking officials and by family members who are well placed in the government took my Ethiopian and Eritrean friends by surprise; they had to in the end acknowledge and be educated that to be Somali in the Horn of Africa is as organic and natural as it is to be German in European or Korean with their whose divisions are only skin thick. For the next few days, through my interactions with the hotel waitress, cab drivers, cleaning ladies....., my fellow delegates were amazed by the boundless oneness of “us” versus “them.”

Once cleared through the immigration, my great friend Dr. Ismael Waise, the man who can move mountains in Djibouti, collected and drove me to the Sheraton located on the edge of the Red Sea. It is a five story, possibly four star hotel, with the top two floors being a new addition in the last two or so years. This addition was the result of a recent upgrade after the Djibouti government sold the facility to Sheikh Al Amudi, the same owner of the Addis Ababa based Sheraton. Sheikh Al Amudi, a Saudi born billionaire, is investing in all sectors of the economies of the Horn of Africa region.

All in all, it is an excellent facility! One can’t complain if sitting by the Red Sea at dinner time comes as natural and as a regular as possible. The hotel’s quality of life is augmented by nightly life music (while there, an Afro-Latin band was playing there every night.) For those Westerners who like Las Vegas life style, they can always visit the adjoining and part of the Hotel “The Aden Bay Casino,” or the Imperial Casino, which is about 10 minutes leisurely walk from the Sheraton.



Sheraton in Djibouti

Oblivious to sin and hell, one can gamble here as much freely as one does in Las Vegas. The only difference is that here in “The Aden Bay Casino” or the “Imperial Casino” you are served by beautiful and exquisite Somali sisters who do all types of bartending work.

The Djibouti Sheraton has been enjoying near full capacity occupation thanks to about 400 German soldiers who are there to do the preliminary work towards assessing the need for that country to establish a base in Djibouti.

In Part two, I will share with the readers of WardheerNews the multiple military establishments (U.S.A., Germany, Japan and France) sprouting in Djibouti, the urban fabric of the city and the emerging regional economic integration where Djibouti is poised to play a key role.

Faisal A. Roble

Email: fabroble@aol.com

References

ⁱ Sir, Richard F. Burton, *First Footsteps in East Africa, or an Exploration of Harar*. Dover Publication, Inc., New York, 1856. Also, see *Mountains of the Moon* (1990) (starring Scottish actor Lain Glen as Speke)

ⁱⁱ Samantha Wilson, *Lonely Planet*, CNN, January, 4, 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ *The World Fact Book*, November, 2011