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Djibouti

The Republic of **Djibouti** (Ar. Jumhūriyyat Jībūtī) has been an independent state since 1977. More than the half of its population of approximately 700,000 to 900,000 lives in the capital city, Djibouti. Data on the ethnic structure of the country's population are a contentious issue. According to a commonly accepted rough estimate, 60 percent are Somali (half of them Issa), 35 percent Afar, and 5 percent Arabs, Ethiopians and Europeans. Covering 23,000 square kilometres, it is the smallest state in northeastern Africa, but it occupies a strategic location, on the south coast of the straits of Bāb al-Mandab that links the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Djibouti shares land boundaries with Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somaliland. It consists of the coastal hinterland of the Gulf of Tajura (Ar. Tajūra), its land borders being an average of eighty-eight kilometres from the coast. Djibouti's climate is extremely arid and hot. It has unique geological features stemming from its location at the junction of three tectonic plates, the African, Arabian, and Somali. The most dramatic geological scenery is 'Asal salt lake, at an elevation of 153 metres below sea

level. The Goda mountains, which reach an elevation of 1500 metres above sea level, provide a refuge for a fragile high-altitude forest and allow limited areas of permanent garden agriculture.

Before the colonial period, the main settlements and harbours on the coast were Tajura on the northern side of the gulf and Zayla' (Zeila) on the southern side. The remains of the latter are now in Somaliland, twenty-five kilometres east of the present-day border. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, this section of the coast was the maritime outlet for trade from the Ethiopian regions of Shawa and Harar, by means of 'Afar and Somali camel caravans.

The French colonial occupation began in 1862, with the purchase of an anchorage in Obock (Afar, Ōboki), at the eastern end of the north coast of the Gulf of Tajura, through a treaty with the sultan of Raḥayto (Brunschwig). This was followed by short-lived commercial ventures. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 stirred competition between the European powers for the control of maritime routes to Asia. France needed a coaling station for the colonial conquest of Indochina and Madagascar. In 1884 Léonce Lagarde (d. 1936) was appointed commander of Obock, a position he held until 1899. He expanded the French dominion by negotiating a series of protectorate agreements over the territories of Gōba'ad, Tajura, Qubbat al-Kharāb, and 'Issa (Prijac). The centre of administration was transferred from Obock to Djibouti in 1892. The various territories were then unified in 1896, under a single administration, the Côte Française des Somalis, called French Somaliland in English (Imbert-Vier).

Since then, the country has comprised two indigenous populations, the 'Afar

(called Danākil in Arabic) who inhabit mostly the northern part of the country, and the 'Issa Somali, who dominate the southern part and are a division of the Dir clan confederation. Both populations are traditionally pastoralists. Their life is centred on camel herding, but the 'Afar specialise also in cattle raising and the 'Issa in sheep raising, especially for export to Saudi Arabia. This common way of life has led to frequent conflicts over scarce natural resources that have developed into competition for political resources (Saïd Chiré). The two populations have divergent political interests on both national and regional stages. The 'Afar are connected with other groups in Ethiopia and in Eritrea, while the 'Issa and other Somali groups have close relations with family and business networks in Somalia and in the worldwide Somali diaspora. Djibouti's population also includes French settlers and migrant workers from Yemen, India, Ethiopia, and Somalia, who were employed in the modern development of the colony, in particular, the construction of the railroad connecting Djibouti's harbour with Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. The Yemeni Arab migrants were instrumental in the development of commerce. Despite issues of national integration that resulted in fragmented citizenship (Bezabeh, Citizenship), the various communities shared (and still share) the unifying social activity of chewing khat (Ar. *qāt*, *Catha edulis*). These leaves contain a mild alkaloid and are chewed, mostly by males, during afternoon gatherings. A significant portion of per capita income is spent on this activity.

In 1958, on the eve of the independence of neighbouring Somalia (1960), Djibouti was called on by the French to decide by referendum whether to

join the Somali Republic or to remain with France. The result was 75 percent in favour of continued association with France. This vote revealed a structural division along ethnic lines. The majority of those who voted “no” were Somalis who aimed to join a greater Somalia that was to become independent and united in 1960, after the decolonisation, under UN supervision, of the former British Somaliland and Italian Somalia. Mahmoud Harbi (d. 1960) was the leading activist in the pan-Somali nationalist movement in Djibouti. The ‘Afar preferred to remain under French sovereignty rather than joining the Somali. In 1960, while other African countries declared their independence, Djibouti remained under French rule. A second referendum was held in 1967, after the riots that followed the visit of General Charles de Gaulle, the French president. Once again, the vote favoured, this time by 58.5 percent, the continuation of French rule. The population was split, as before, between the ‘Issa Somali, who campaigned for independence, with the goal of eventual reunion with Somalia, and the ‘Afar, who rejected this scenario. This ethnic split was reflected in the new name given the country, Territoire français des Afars et des Issas, in order to promote the ‘Afar component and downplay Somali nationalism. Ali Aref Bourhan (b. 1934), an ‘Afar, became president, in 1967, of the government council, a post he held until 1975. Growing internal tensions and international pressure led to independence, which was declared in June 1977.

Hassan Gouled Aptidon (d. 2006), an ‘Issa Somali, who had been a supporter of a gradual process leading to independence, became the first president of the independent Republic of Djibouti. He established a one-party regime under

the control of the *Rassemblement Populaire pour le Progrès*. Somalis dominated the whole apparatus of power. Djibouti joined the Arab League two months before its independence. After the defeat of the Somalian army by Ethiopia in 1977, pan-Somali nationalism declined and union with Somalia was no longer an option. In the context of the Cold War, Djibouti remained a major strategic foothold for the French army. In 1991, after the collapse of the military dictatorship in Ethiopia and the outbreak of civil war in Somalia, Djibouti was also in trouble. The ‘Afar opposition groups, who felt excluded from power, formed an armed rebel group, the *Front pour la Restauration de l’Unité et la Démocratie*. The march of the rebels on the capital was stopped by French troops. After constitutional revision, multiparty elections were held and were boycotted by the ‘Afar opposition. Aptidon was reelected and resigned in 1999. He was succeeded by his nephew, Ismail Omar Guelleh (b. 1947), who was reelected in 2005 and 2011. The system of government was modified to introduce power-sharing between the Somali president and an ‘Afar prime minister, and ministerial positions are similarly balanced, but influential Somali families with business connections maintain their grip on power.

After independence, the continued heavy French military presence provided the main source of revenue for the formal sector of Djibouti’s economy. Since the end of the twentieth century, France has gradually reduced its Djibouti-based forces. This disengagement has been compensated for by the installation of the United States Africa Command (USAFRICOM) in 2008, on a former French base. A Japanese base was established in 2011, and troops from various countries joined

the multilateral mission against piracy in the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. Besides this regular military income, the transit economy of Djibouti has been strengthened by the surge in Ethiopian economic development. After the outbreak of the Ethiopian war against Eritrea in 1998, Djibouti became the main conduit for Ethiopian trade. Investments in upgrading and expanding the port facilities of Djibouti have been managed by the Dubai Ports World company. The development of the port of Tajura is also financed by Arab funds, in connection with the construction by a Turkish consortium of a new railroad to northern Ethiopia (Styan).

Islam is the religion of ninety-eight percent of the population of Djibouti. The Shāfiʿī school of law is the most widely followed. Ṣūfism was well established for centuries among ʿAfar and Somalis, through saintly figures who transited from Arabia to the Horn of Africa through Zaylaʿ. Although both peoples kept their traditional beliefs, there was an Islamic revival movement in the nineteenth century, in particular through the diffusion of Qādirī rituals that were reinterpreted in local languages (the Qādirīyya is a widespread Ṣūfī order, of which ʿAbd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, d. 561/1166, a Ḥanbalī scholar active in Baghdad, became, after his death, the namesake and patron). The most popular mausolea in Djibouti city are dedicated to Shaykh Mūsā and Shaykh ʿUthmān, two Somali religious figures of the twentieth century. Some Ḥaḍramī-Yamanī adhere to the ʿAlawiyya *ṭarīqa* (lit., way, hence Ṣūfī order) and maintain relations to shrines in Aden and Tarīm (the ʿAlāwiyya is a Ṣūfī brotherhood centred in Ḥaḍramawt, Yemen, but now spread across the Indian Ocean; it was founded by Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Bā ʿAlawī al-Ḥusaynī, d. 653/1232).

During the colonial period, the authorities distinguished between indigenous African Islam, which they considered moderate, and the Islam practised by the Arab migrants, whom they saw as more “genuine” and potentially more “fanatical.” To counter these presumably radical tendencies, the French colonial authorities in Djibouti appointed Muslim officials and encouraged the spread of Catholicism, which, nevertheless, had only a limited impact. After independence, Islam was made the official religion, and this was enshrined in the 1992 constitution. With the development of armed Islamist rebellions in neighbouring countries (notably al-Qāʿida in Yemen and al-Shabāb in Somalia), religious policy was reoriented to curb the expansion of Salafī movements, seen as an external threat. The Ministry of Waqf and Muslim Affairs was created in 1999 and the High Islamic Council in 2004.

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