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The Evolution of Forward-Based Forces in Djibouti

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The tiny country of Djibouti, uniquely situated where the Africa, Arabia and Somalia tectonic plate boundaries meet, is becoming recognized as a strategic location for military efforts. French, American, and Japanese armed forces, currently based in the area guarding the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, are assigned missions on this triple front.



Training for Medical Support, Combat and Desert Training. (Photo: D. PAYET © 5eRIAOM)

African Plate: The tiny trading port purchased from the Sultan in 1862, became a French colony called French Somaliland. After independence in 1977, the country was renamed Djibouti. Today France retains a military presence in this part of the world for the defense of the Djiboutian territorial integrity and population. French forces based in Djibouti (or FFDj « Forces françaises stationnées à Djibouti ») are among 12,000 pre-positioned around the globe to cooperate with local militaries, support stability operations, crisis management, or the rescue of endangered French citizens abroad (presence and sovereignty forces). This is the case in the Eastern part of the African continent under the FFDj COMFOR's area of permanent responsibility, which encompasses Yemen, Somalia and Sudan. The FFDj can also be sent to other parts of the African continent as reinforcement and support if need be. For instance, the most recent was the Sangaris operation, which took place in Central African Republic last year the French military is now starting to disengage from that mission as the European Military Advisory Mission – EUMAM CAR – gradually takes over.

Arabian Plate: The re-balancing of French power projection forces between Africa and the Middle-East under President Sarkozy has led to the departure of the Foreign Legion from Djibouti to the United Arab Emirates in 2011 – this includes 1,100 soldiers belonging to the 13e DBLE or « Demi Brigade de la Légion étrangère ». Support of the French forces stationed in the UAE (FFEAU « Forces françaises stationnées aux Emirats arabes unis ») organically depends in part on Djibouti infrastructure. As was the case with the 2012/2013 Tamour operation in Jordania, when a French medical detachment was deployed from Djibouti to Jordania-based Zaatar Camp to support the Syrian refugees fleeing the war, a similar reinforcement model could again happen if necessary in the fight against ISIS in Iraq within the Chammal operation – such as the French contribution to the multinational operation 'Inherent Resolve'. Djibouti had in fact already provided support to the Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier, which stopped for a few days last February (2015) on its way to the Persian Gulf. The battle group did carry its first Rafale strike on February 25th, officially joining the 3,200 French forces who have been engaged against Terror on that front since September 2014.

Somali Plate: Interestingly, Djibouti, as a French colony (before briefly being called the Afars and Issas Territory), was known as the French Coast of the Somalis, or French Somaliland. The Somali Battalion was hence composed of soldiers from the region and fought very courageously on the side of French forces during World War I and II. Today, the sole remaining French Army component, the 5e RIAOM (« Régiment interarmées d'Outre mer »), has inherited the traditions of the Somali Battalion. Improving the situation in Somalia has been the focus of several broader initiatives such as the EUTM-Somalia (European Union Training Mission); AMISOM (African Mission In Somalia) supported by the United Nations; and ACOTA (Africa Contingency Operations Training and Assistance) managed by the US State Department and supported by US AFRICOM. All were created between the mid-2000s and 2010 and work in close cooperation. Through these multilateral missions, as well as via bilateral

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cooperation agreements with Uganda, Burundi and Djibouti, French armed forces have been increasingly involved in training the Somalia battalions to fight.

French forces stationed in Djibouti are therefore strongly relying on the legacy of decades of presence in the area to tackle new challenges and responsibilities in a unique and rapidly evolving multinational framework.



Support and Logistic Hub

Initially conceived in 1884 as a supply stop for the French Navy in the context of the Tonkin War, Djibouti's harbour, which was developed four years later, considerably expanded between the two wars to later become France's third important harbour after Le Havre and Marseille in the 1950s. Even though French investment capital is being increasingly replaced by many other foreign countries', especially Dubai and China, the need to increase maritime security in this area against piracy, as well as against maritime terrorist risks (illustrated by the 2000 attack against the USS *Cole*) has been granting the French naval base a key support role not only to the benefit of French ships transiting in the

area, but also to the benefit of an increasingly large number of foreign ships from all over the world. The FFDj has developed into a strategic support and logistic hub. European, American, but also Asian ships stop by, as port infrastructure keeps developing and national and multilateral counter-piracy initiatives have been booming in the area in the past several years. These include the European Union NAVFOR-Atalanta and EUCAP Nestor; NATO's Allied Provider (now called Ocean Shield); the US Combine Task Force 151; and individual national deployments from countries such as China, India or South Korea. Even though both Ocean Shield and Atalanta may not be pursued till 2016 as officially planned, since the number of piracy acts have been steadily declining in this part of the world compared to an increase in South East Asia and the Gulf of Guinea, Djibouti as a strategic hub has recently taken on new importance by other nations. American forces, which began arriving in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, now outnumber French forces in the region. Camp Lemonnier, which is rented by the U.S. military now hosts 5,000 American military personnel and 1,000 contractors. Japan has also discovered the advantages of this area and has established its very first overseas base on Djiboutian territory.

The traditional role of France in the defense of Djibouti makes its military infrastructure especially valuable for nations involved in operations, but also for those developing a logistic footprint of their own. Examples of the support provided on a daily basis by the FFDj to other nations are numerous, such as the hosting of Atalanta's logistic support Headquarters, the FHQSA (Force Headquarters Somalia Atalanta) on the French naval base; medical support provided to foreign armed forces on a regular basis thanks to the military health services and facilities (Role 3 hospital); as well as the necessary air transport capabilities (the French Air Force and Army Aviation indeed also operate Puma SAR helicopters and train on-site dedicated search and rescue diver teams); Spanish and German military detachments are also deployed on the French airbase.

In a November interview with FAF General Philippe Montocchio, COMFOR FFDj, he explained the advantages of the area for the Spanish and German military: "These countries have neither a base, nor the means to rapidly project one, so they benefit from the infrastructure existing on FAF Base 188 [...] where they have established a small Spanish "comer" and a German one. In addition to the Americans, the Germans, the Spanish, the Japanese, one can also find Italians and a small Swedish detachment in Djibouti. Compared to all these nations present on the Djiboutian territory, France's posture is a bit different. When the French forces are not being used in operations, they essentially train to be ready to intervene if need be. Foreign forces stationed in Djibouti, on the other hand, only came here in the framework of an operation [...] and have therefore less time to spend on training. But as soon as a joint training opportunity occurs, we do not hesitate."



French anti-submarine frigate Georges Leygues participates with the French intervention and reinforcement group (GIR) in an exercise aimed at protecting ships from potential sea-based or land-based dangers as they transit the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait. (2013 Photo: Didier Geffroy, FFDj, Djibouti's harbour)

Along with other nations, especially the Americans, French naval and air forces also train the Djiboutian Coast Guard to ensure, with the Djiboutian armed forces, the safety of maritime access to the harbour.

Center of Excellence for Desert Training

Training the armed forces from Djibouti, Uganda, Burundi and Ethiopia bilaterally or multilaterally is being done in the context of the missions relevant to the French AOR. In addition, the specific environmental characteristics of Djibouti – extreme temperatures, harsh winds, rough rocky or sandy terrain, very dark nights – intertwined with fewer urban constraints (electric lines, air traffic) have traditionally boosted Djibouti as a privileged training site. This is particularly true for Army and Special Forces

training, as the 5e RIAOM manages a dedicated combat and sustainment training centre called the CECAD (« Centre d'entraînement au combat et d'aguerrissement au désert » or Desert School). Bilateral training with the U.S. Marines, the Djiboutian Army and, more recently the Ethiopian Army, routinely take place at the Centre.

The French knowledge of how to operate in an environment deprived of everything – including water (it should be stressed that a soldier fighting in Africa needs between 6 to 10 litres per day) – came from Nomadic traditions and has been preserved and updated over the years. Creating a fire with a phone battery, using a specific desert plant to disinfect a water content, recovering water from condensation, and reducing heat with a wet sock, are among the skills and drills being taught to the thousands of troops passing through Djibouti on their way to battlefield deployments that increasingly demand high levels of personal autonomy.



Every single opportunity to train is being seized, sometimes via international competition events such as the International Concentration for Advanced Sniping (ICASD), which was created 12 years ago by the French « Commandos marine », and was held last October with the participation of French, American and Italian Special Forces.

Air forces and military aviators are also taking advantage of opportunities in Djibouti, whether on a national, joint, or multilateral basis. For example, Djibouti offers French Army Aviation a rather exceptional opportunity for ground troops to practice tactics requiring air support that are not always feasible back home. As the Commander of the Army Aviation Detachment (DETALAT for « Détachement de l'Aviation légère de l'armée de Terre »), Lieutenant-Colonel Moreau de Bellaing highlights :

« Djibouti presents an environment, which is especially privileged to train for the missions for which Army Aviation and our armed forces in general must be prepared. Whether it is precision airdrop, tactical flight, flying with night vision goggles, fast-roping exercises, ship- or dust-landing, prevailing conditions allow us to constantly improve our techniques with more security than on the mainland and while optimizing all available permanent or temporary means. »



Nov 2011 – A French marine from the 5th Infantry Overseas Battalion pins the Desert Survival and Combat Course pin on U.S. Army Sgt Casey Gile, 161st Field Artillery. The DSCC, instructed by French Marines, is designed to teach how to fight and survive in the desert. (Photo: Staff Sgt. Jonathan Steffen)

Having a sample of the full spectrum of French armed forces at its disposal – with all its components Air, Ground, Sea, Special Forces, combatant support (medical, maintenance, food, fuel), communication and infrastructure – is what French military officers pre-positioned in Djibouti especially value.

With the end of military conscription in 1998, the structure of the French troops evolved considerably with fewer long-term deployments (usually three years) and an increasingly larger number of short-term missions (four months). Only a third of the 5e RIAOM is now composed of long-term personnel, but commanders, such as Colonel Jean-Bruno Despouys, Commanding Officer of the 5e RIAOM and commander of the joint tactical group « GTIA Scorpion » during Sangaris, consider this to be a good balance as it allows the Force to maintain the legacy and know-how acquired over more than a century in this part of the world, while benefitting from state-of-the-art new tactics brought in by young trainees arriving from the mainland.

Djibouti has been the 'chosen ground' to train troops prior to their deployment to Afghanistan, and now to the Barkhane operation in the Sahel area. The FFDj have therefore been constantly adapting to shifting threats by applying lessons learned and training even harder than one fight. It has proven effective in the past years, particularly

given the evolution of current conflicts, whether during the Harmattan operation; French participation to the 2011 NATO air strikes over Libya, during which helicopter pilots had to manoeuvre in the typical African dark moonless nights; or during Serval in Mali, where climate and terrain conditions are very similar to Djibouti; or more recently Sangaris, in the Central African Republic.



Franco-US Training Exercise in Djibouti. (2012 Photo: D. Payet, French Army)

As Lieutenant-Colonel Gabriel Soubrier, in charge of the BOI (Bureau opérations instruction, or Operations Instruction Division) for the 5e RIAOM, notes about his regiment (the *heir of 123 years of nomadic traditions*) which is the last French regiment to be prepositioned in the Horn of Africa: "[it is] strongly anchored in its environment, integrated in Djibouti – which constitutes its starting base – and oriented towards operations thanks to military tools which are robust, light and able to manoeuvre over long distances. We are fully dedicated to projection, which is our *'raison d'être'* and our calling."

Military vocabulary is being internationalized from "starting base" to FOB, and from "projection" back to expeditionary forces, but the concept remains intact: the 5e RIAOM has been deployed from or in Djibouti to participate to 14 operations since 1991.

Even though smaller and smaller in its overall format, presence, and economic influence, what is indeed now referred to as France's "Forward Operating Base – East Africa" has been constantly adapting to an evolving international environment and appears well suited to face the current tectonic changes of the threat. The same way the construction of Djibouti's deep water harbour and subsequent related prosperity stemmed from an unfortunate event (the 1926 blaze on the *Messagerie Maritime* steamship Fontainebleau), a new promising era of enhanced joint multilateral cooperation seems to have emerged from the ashes of Terror and Piracy in the region.

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This article is based in part on interviews Murielle Delaporte. conducted last November with French and U.S. military forces based in Djibouti.

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