

Djibouti in the “axis of resistance”?

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For *The Guardian*, Djibouti supports the “axis of resistance” against the West

In an article published yesterday, Thursday March 14, in the columns of the leading newspaper *The Guardian*, Patrick Wintour, echoing the words of Farea al-Muslimi, a *Chatham House* expert on Yemen issues, does not hesitate to mention the Republic of Djibouti as being involved in the Houthi attacks on ships near the Yemeni coast.

“The Houthis have discovered that they can twist the world's arm at a very low price.

It was predicted that the attacks would not cease until there was a ceasefire in Gaza, leading to wider de-escalation in the region.

It was also claimed that Djibouti, across the Red Sea, not only prevented the West from using it as a base to attack the Houthis, but also helped Iranian spy ships that wished to remain in Djibouti's waters or even use the Chinese naval port there.”¹.

With all due respect for *The Guardian's* publications, we can't help but think that Patrick Wintour, in reporting this expert's comments without hindsight or analysis, was a little hasty. The assertion that Djibouti has set red lines for its allies positioned on its territory, notably concerning the response to attacks on ships, is accurate. Indeed, Djibouti excludes Houthi forces in Yemen from being targeted from Djiboutian territory. This is a fact that Djibouti does not seek to hide, on the contrary. This political line has been affirmed by the highest authorities: the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Head of State, to several international media. For example, in the Saudi press on February 12, the Head of State recalled “[Djibouti's] refusal to allow any party to be targeted from its soil. He recalled that the international military bases installed in the country are there to maintain global security, combat terrorism and piracy, and protect navigation in this crucial zone.”².

What's so surprising about this stance?

It can only be surprising if we forget to mention that all the countries on the Arabian Peninsula and bordering Yemen, with the exception of Bahrain, home to the US 5th Fleet, share Djibouti's position.

The growing autonomy of Djibouti's diplomacy from the Western bloc may come as a surprise, echoing the loss of French influence on the continent. The reality is more prosaic, guided by security considerations. By refusing any escalation from its territory, Djibouti is preventing any action that could destabilise the regional situation, and weaken a country that is already bearing the full brunt of the economic consequences of the detour of maritime traffic around the Cape of Good Hope. Need we remind Farea al-Muslimi that the Houthis are threatening to strike the ships of any country that launches missiles at Yemen, and that, for “any missile fired at Yemen, the sites from which they originated will be targeted”³. The message to countries with cruise missiles/ballistic missiles capable of striking a target from a distance is very clear. Djibouti is not the only country not to overlook the Houthi threat. Even equipped with state-of-the-art anti-aircraft systems, the “Spartan Emirates” have politely

1. Patrick Wintour, “UN must block Iranian missile supply to Houthis in Yemen, UK and US say”, *The Guardian*, 14 mars 2024.

2. Abdulhadi Habtor, “Djibouti President: We Are Monitoring Red Sea Developments, Reject Targeting of Our Land”, AAWSAT, 12 février 2024.

3. Howard Altman, “Houthi Threaten Reprisal Attacks On U.S. Bases In The Region”, TWZ, 13 janvier 2024.

refused to allow their territory to be used to launch missiles against Houtie positions. So why wage a stigmatization campaign over Djibouti's refusal to take an active part in the armed confrontation against the Houthis? Is Djibouti seen as the weak link in Yemen's neighboring countries, whose arm can be twisted?



The Chinese naval base in the Gulf of Tadjoura

On the other hand, when *The Guardian* asserts that Djibouti supports “Iranian spy ships that wish to remain in Djibouti waters or even use the Chinese naval port there”, this reference media is mistaken. A shameless assertion.

Questioned in the columns of *Jeune Afrique* about the Houtie attacks in the Red Sea, Ismail Omar Guelleh points the finger at Iran as the invisible hand and the real instigator of these disruptions to international maritime traffic. “Obviously, because it seriously disrupts the freedom of maritime traffic in the Red Sea. This is the sole effect of what is in reality a *proxy war* led by Iran, via the Houtis, against the United States, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and NATO. The Israelis don't care, and I'd even go so far as to say that this situation suits them. If what really motivates the Houtis is Gaza, they'd do well to send their missiles north.”⁴.

Besides, Iran has no use for Djibouti's alleged support. Since January 11, in international waters just 100 kilometers east of the port of Djibouti⁵, it has been operating a mysterious ship in the Red Sea called the Behshad, “which has come under increased scrutiny from maritime experts, who fear it may be helping Houthi rebels target commercial shipping”, as reported in the *Financial Times*⁶.

“The Behshad, which outwardly resembles a standard dry bulk carrier, reached the Gulf of Aden in January after spending years in the Red Sea, just as attacks on ships were multiplying in this vital waterway off Yemen.

Since then, it has been following an unorthodox, slow and winding course through these waters close to the entrance to the Red Sea. Experts have also noted a drop in Houthi attacks during the period last month when the Behshad was apparently out of action”.

4. François Soudan, “Ismail Omar Guelleh : ‘Un génocide est en cours à Gaza, je n’ai aucun doute la-dessus’”, *Jeune Afrique*, 8 mars 2024.

5. “Attaques en mer Rouge : ce mystérieux navire iranien suspecté d’aider les Houthis”, *L’Express*, 10 mars 2023

6. Robert Wright, “The mysterious Iranian ship accused of lining up the next Houtis targets”, *Financial Times*, 14 mars 2024.



Iranian ships in the Red Sea

The accusation of collusion between Djibouti and Iran is not new

This is not the first time Djibouti has been accused of being close to Iran. In June 2019, the President of the Republic issued a press release rejecting what it described as defamatory reports in the international press. It reported “the presence of Iranian warships in Djibouti's ports. This information is false and must therefore be seen as an outright lie. [...] It is all the more dishonest to accuse Djibouti of links with Iran when our country is known worldwide for having put an end, more than three years ago, to all forms of relations with Teheran”⁷.

When asked about this latest controversy, an astute observer who asked to remain anonymous outlines the issues behind the curtains. “Djibouti is certainly a major ally of NATO countries in this part of the world. The relationship is solid and enduring, but it has been troubled since the Chinese army landed in Djibouti. It should be borne in mind that since the Gulf War, Djibouti has been considered to be in the Western bosom. This refusal to fire on the Houthis from Djibouti is very disturbing for them. What's more, the Western bloc takes no account of our special relations with Yemen.

Amat Ali Alim Alsoswa, Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for the Arab States, is undoubtedly the person best placed to talk about the links between Yemen and Djibouti. Responding to Jeske Van Seters in our columns in 2008, she described their intensity: “I wanted to emphasise the ancestral ties that unite our two peoples, since as you probably know I'm originally from Yemen. These ties rest on solid foundations; we share a common, intertwined past. Intertwined by history, cultural exchanges and even trade. I find many similarities between our two countries, our two cultures, both belonging to the same region, the same geostrategic zone, both benefiting from privileged relations and massive investment from the Gulf States, and more particularly Dubai. Similar in terms of dress, culinary specialties, culture, climate, economic and social development... I'd like to emphasise that social problems are often identical between these two countries, which face the same challenges: Young people suffering from unemployment, a rural population struggling to cope with drought, and extreme poverty among the most destitute... I could continue on the same theme by emphasising that our two economies are intertwined, even interdependent, and point out that these links often go beyond that, as they are also filial. That's why, in answer to your question, I believe that the pre-existing links between our two countries can and must grow. Cooperation must be intensified, so that we can find answers to concerns that are often identical. I see the construction of this bridge over the Bab El-Mandeb Strait as an instrument, a tool for the development of our two countries, and not at all as the genesis of new ties.”⁸.

7. Mahdi A., “Tempête dans un verre d'eau pour un navire iranien bloqué à Djibouti”, *Human Village*, 13 juin 2019.

8. Jeske Van Seters, “En aparté avec... Amat Ali Alim Alsoswa”, *Human Village*, mai 2008.

On the question of the Houtis, Djibouti favours an approach that avoids armed confrontation and allows for negotiations. These may already be underway, if the *Financial Times* is to be believed, with reports of secret exchanges in Oman between Iranians and Americans on issues relating to the Red Sea⁹.

Djibouti will play its part to the full, in the same spirit of efficiency and partnership as for Operation Atalanta, as Mahmoud Ali Youssouf reminded the European Union delegation, which is preparing to launch Operation EUNAVFOR ASPIDES in the Red Sea, distinct from that of the Anglo-Saxons, since it focuses on eliminating missiles or drones in the event of an attack at sea.

In this period of unrest, geostrategic turmoil and proxy confrontations, the words of Hans Grundberg, Special Envoy for Yemen, addressing the members of the Security Council yesterday, Thursday March 14, should encourage all protagonists to exercise caution. A small spark could turn into a bushfire.... No one would come out a winner: “the longer the escalation goes on, the more difficult it will become to mediate in Yemen [...]. In the worst-case scenario, the parties could decide to engage in risky military adventurism that would propel Yemen into a new cycle of war,” he added.”¹⁰.

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9. Felicia Schwartz, Andrew England, “US held secret talks with Iran over Red Sea attacks”, *Financial Times*, 14 mars 2024.

10. “Yémen : des hauts responsables de l’ONU appellent au cessez-le-feu et à la reprise du processus politique”, *News UN*, 14 mars 2024.