Djibouti the next target of Al-Shabaab

Dr. Shaul Shay

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In a video released on March 26, 2021, the leader of Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen, Abu Ubaydah Ahmad Omar lashed out at Djibouti’s President Ismail Omar Guelleh, who has been in power since 1999 and is set to win a fifth term in elections on April 9, 2021. Abu Ubaydah accused Guelleh of turning the Horn of Africa country "into a military base from where every war against the Muslims in East Africa is planned and executed. Make American and French interests in Djibouti the highest priority of your targets," he said in the video.¹ Abu Ubaydah became the leader of the group in 2014, after his predecessor, Ahmed Abdi Godane, was killed in a U.S. drone strike.

It is not the first time that the leader of Al Shabaab called for attacks against American, French and Israeli targets.

On January 5, 2021, Al-Shabaab’s leader, Abu Ubaydah urged his followers to step up attacks against American and Israeli targets and also called for attacks on France for its “crimes” against the honor of the prophet Muhammad. Abu Ubaydah marked the anniversary of the terrorist group’s attack on Camp Simba in Kenya, claiming it was revenge for alleged U.S. crimes against the Muslims of Somalia. He added that it was also part of a series of attacks under the slogan, “Jerusalem will never be Judaized”, launched by Al-Qaeda in response to the Trump administration’s decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to the city of Jerusalem.²

**The attack on a restaurant in Djibouti (2014)**

The last attack of Somali Al Shabaab against targets in Djibouti occurred in 2014. Al Shabaab was behind a restaurant attack in Djibouti by two suicide bombers. In the first attack of its kind in Djibouti, a man and a woman blew themselves up at a restaurant on May 27, 2014, when it was filled with Western military personnel, killing a Turkish man and injuring around 20 other people, including seven French nationals, six Dutch citizens, four Germans and three Spaniards.³

The European Union said members of the its naval mission EUNAVFOR Atlanta and civilian maritime security mission EUCAP Nestor were wounded in Djibouti bombing.⁴

The jihadist group said it had targeted the restaurant because it was popular with "French crusaders and their NATO allies".⁵ "The attack was carried out against the French Crusaders for their complicity in the massacres and persecution of our Muslim brothers in the Central African Republic and for

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¹ Al-Shabaab calls for attacks on US, French interests in Djibouti, Ahram online, March 27, 2021.
² Al-Shabaab terror group calls to attack Israeli, American, French targets, JNS, January 5, 2021.
³ Al Shabaab claims responsibility for Djibouti suicide attack, Reuters, May 27, 2014.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Al-Shabaab calls for attacks on US, French interests in Djibouti, Ahram online, March 27, 2021.
their active role in training and equipping the apostate Djiboutian troops in Somalia,” al Shabaab said in a statement.  

The strategic importance of Djibouti

Djibouti has a land area of only 23,000 square kilometers; a population of barely 830,000 and no natural resources but Djibouti’s geographical location attracts foreign powers. Countries around the world race to establish military bases in Djibouti, because of its geostrategic location as it lies on the western coast of Bab al-Mandeb Strait.

Another aspect of Djibouti’s geographic position that makes it attractive to foreign powers is its proximity to potential crisis areas, not just in the Horn of Africa but also the rest of the African continent. Djibouti’s nearest neighbors include two hot spots: Yemen and Somalia. Djibouti’s relative peace and stability in an area of chaos provide foreign powers suitable staging area for their military operations in the region.  

Djibouti hosts in its territory, military bases for the United States, France, Italy, Japan, China and Saudi Arabia. Renting military bases is considered one of the most important sources of revenues for Djibouti.

Djibouti is furthermore host to a contingent of African Union (AMISOM) troops fighting the al-Qaeda linked Al-Shabaab in Somalia, where the Islamists have waged a long and violent insurgency seeking to unseat the internationally-backed government.

The United States

The United States established a base in Djibouti in 2002 after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Djibouti hosts the largest American permanent military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, which is home to more than 4,000 personnel - mostly part of the Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa. For the Americans, Camp Lemonnier is the hub for their Global War against terrorism.

The US military regularly conducts secret operations and drone raids against al Qaeda of the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen and Al Shabaab in Somalia, from its base in Djibouti.

In addition to logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition that has been fighting against the Houthi rebels in Yemen since March 2015, the US military in the Horn of Africa has been helping to ensure free navigation through the Bab al-Mandeb strait that almost all the US warships,

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7 Ben Ho Wan Beng, , the Strategic Attractions of Djibouti, the National Interest, March 18, 2016.
including aircraft carriers and submarines cross on their way between the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean.

**France**

Djibouti is home to France's largest overseas military base, under a 1977 bilateral defense protocol. From 1999 to 2001, Djibouti fought an insurgency that was eventually put down with French assistance. Following the war, Djibouti became increasingly stable and France gave over, Camp Lemonnier, a former Foreign Legion post, to the government of Djibouti, which then leased it to the US in 2001.

The 1,450 soldiers of the French forces in Djibouti (FFD) are stationed in Djibouti in accordance with the defense cooperation treaty that France signed in 2011 with that country. France's air force presence, including the helicopter unit that is essential for surveillance and intelligence-gathering capacity in the Horn of Africa.

The advanced operational base (AOB) in Djibouti provides French forces, various capabilities:

- As a reservoir of forces, it participates in the defense of the French interests, the logistical support of the operations on the continent, while contributing to military actions for the benefit of several African countries.

- In addition, French forces stationed in Djibouti are supporting their partners in the East African Regional Economic Community to strengthen their military capabilities, including through their participation in peacekeeping operations. \(^8\) The French forces in Djibouti have taken part in operations in Somalia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Ivory Coast.

**China**

China started building its first base out of China, in Djibouti, in February 2016, and formally opened the base, on August 1, 2017. China’s agreement with Djibouti ensures its military presence in the country up until 2026, with a contingent of up to 10,000 soldiers and China is paying $20 million per year in rent. \(^9\)

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\(^8\) Medium Range Missile Evaluation Campaign in Djibouti, aerospace.com, October 11, 2018.

\(^9\) China sends troops to Djibouti base: Beijing’s growing presence in Indian Ocean Region should rattle India, US, first post, July 13, 2017.
China’s commitment has broadened in line with the deepening of its economic and commercial relations with the region and as part of a nascent but growing global military engagement policy stretching from the South China Sea to East Africa.

This has meant the establishment of a strong navy allowing China to project its power around the world, and naval bases like that in Djibouti will be essential to achieve this ambition.

The Djibouti base, along with naval patrols near the Gulfs of Oman and Aden and the regular visits of Chinese warships to foreign ports in the region, reflected China’s growing global influence.

**The official goals of China in Djibouti**

China sought to send a message that it was not about projecting force or Chinese influence. Chinese state-owned media outlet, Xinhua highlighted that the base "is meant for supply missions, is not a military outpost built to boost the country's military presence and play deterrent roles in the region."

The Djibouti base has nothing to do with an arms race or military expansion, and China has no intention of turning the logistics center into a military foothold," the media outlet pointed out.10

According to the Chinese government, the base is intended to help Beijing in its humanitarian and peacekeeping missions in Africa (2,400 Chinese soldiers are now deployed on the continent) and Western Asia and to lead emergency relief, protection, and evacuation work of Chinese citizens living overseas and engage in military cooperation, including joint maneuvers, and combat piracy.11

The base will also be responsible for ensuring the security of international and strategic seaways near the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, in order to protect China’s massive economic interests in Africa and the Middle East.

Chinese ships have deployed to the Gulf of Aden since 2008 to help protect commercial shipping against piracy and other dangers. Though its forces have not part of any of the other multi-national counter-piracy task forces in the region, China has conducted this mission unilaterally under the broad mandate of UN Security Council.

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10 Why China's First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti is 'Only the Beginning', Sputnik, July 13, 2017.

In 2011, China has sent one of its warships together with military transport aircrafts to help in the evacuation of about 35,000 Chinese citizens from Libya. In 2015, China detached three navy ships from the anti-piracy patrols to rescue Chinese citizens and other foreign nationals from fighting in Yemen.  

China increasingly intends to show that it is a global power and the new base in Djibouti should be viewed in this context. There are signs indicating that the Djibouti base won't be Beijing's only military installation abroad. China is increasingly focusing on the use of its Armed Forces for what they call the 'protection of foreign interests' which lie far beyond the borders of the PRC. This includes Africa and the Middle East. New Chinese support bases and logistic hubs may soon appear in other places to ensure the security of the China-led "One Belt One Road" initiative.

Japan
Japan has joined in 2009 other nations in setting up anti-piracy operations in the region. In 2011, Japan set up the base in Djibouti by leasing land next to Djibouti International Airport from the Djibouti government. The facility, the first base for the Maritime Self-Defense Force (Maritime SDF) beyond Japan.

The base featured an apron for aircraft, a hanger and housing for MSDF members. In 2018, the facility was expanded to 15 hectares, as an additional plot was leased. Currently, an MSDF destroyer and two P-3C patrol aircraft are deployed in Djibouti to provide protection against pirates.  

About 600 members of its Maritime SDF rotate between a land facility and naval vessels operating from Djibouti's ports. The SDF has already used the Djibouti site for the transport of logistics for SDF members participating in U.N. peacekeeping operations and for evacuation drills conducted under a scenario to rescue Japanese nationals living overseas who are at risk of being harmed in a conflict.

Due to concerns about China, which is exerting growing influence in the region with plans for a "One Belt One Road" initiative, the Defense Ministry of Japan is moving to expand the Japanese base in Djibouti. The ministry is keen to expand its functions beyond anti-piracy operations based on security legislation enacted to give the SDF wider scope in its overseas activities.  

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12 China sends forces to 1st military base abroad, in Djibouti, abcNews, July 11, 2017.
13 Japan to expand SDF base in Djibouti in part to counter China, The Asahi Shimbun, November 15, 2018.
14 Ibid.
**Saudi Arabia**

The Saudi interest in Djibouti, for the short term at least, stems from the Kingdom’s involvement in the Yemeni war. Djibouti’s Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Ali Youssef, said on January 6, 2016, that his country has severed diplomatic ties with Iran. The move by Djibouti intended to exhibit solidarity with Saudi Arabia, which cut ties with Iran on January 3, 2016.\(^{15}\)

As part of the strategic cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Djibouti welcomed a Saudi military presence on its territory. A Saudi facility in Djibouti could benefit Riyadh as this would open up a new front against the Houthis. Moreover, Iran has allegedly supplied the Houthis with arms via ships in the Gulf of Aden, and a Saudi military presence in Djibouti could help block this.

**Operation "Jerusalem Will Never be Judaized"**

In January 2019 Al-Qaeda launched a campaign called “Jerusalem will never be Judaized” in response to the Trump administration’s decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to the city of Jerusalem.\(^{16}\) Under campaign “Jerusalem will never be Judaized” the group’s affiliates in East and West Africa have carried out high profile terror attacks in respective regions and beyond. Abdullah’s plot was allegedly part of the terror campaign.\(^{17}\)

**On December 5, 2019,** U.S. Africa Command and Kenya Defense forces (KDF) repelled an attack on Manda Airstrip near the Camp Simba U.S. base in Lamu county, near Kenya's border with Somalia. A U.S. service member and two civilian contractors working for the Department of Defense were killed and two other U.S. Department of Defense personnel were wounded in the attack. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for the attack and Kenya’s military said it killed at least four terrorists in repelling the attack. Al-Shabaab said that the attack was "part of Harakat Al-Shabaab Al Mujahideen’s - Jerusalem will never be Judaized' military operation".

**On September 30, 2019,** Al Shabaab launched two attacks on U.S and European military targets in Somalia. The first attack was on the Belidogle military airstrip which is a base for U.S. and Somalia forces in the Lower Shabelle region in southern Somalia. A suicide car bomber detonated a vehicle packed with explosives at the gate of the Belidogle airstrip. The U.S. military uses the Belidogle airstrip base to launch drones that attack Al-Shabab targets and to train Somali troops.

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\(^{15}\) Djibouti severs diplomatic ties with Iran, The Economist, January 11, 2016.


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
The second attack was by a suicide car bomber targeting Italian peacekeepers in Mogadishu. The explosion missed a convoy of the European Union peacekeepers but injured Somali civilians who were nearby.

On January 16, 2019, Al-Shabaab attacked the Dusit D2 hotel in Nairobi killing 14 civilians, including one American. In its statement claiming responsibility for the attack, Al-Shabaab said it was in response to U.S. President Donald Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. “Even if the Zionists and crusaders were to move all the embassies in the world to Jerusalem, the sacred land shall forever remain a noble Muslim sanctuary, without concession or compromise. Jerusalem will never be Judaized,” the statement said.  

**Summery**

Al-Shabaab is now considered the most dangerous branch of al-Qaeda and therefore the threat of the organization to hit targets in Djibouti and especially American and French targets in this country must be taken seriously.

Despite suffering setbacks in recent years due to an African Union–led military operation and US drone attacks, Al-Shabaab is capable of carrying out massive and deadly attacks in Somalia and across East Africa.

Al-Shabaab has been on the offensive since 2019 and increased its attacks on African Union (AMISOM) bases, Somali government facilities and officials and security forces, US and EU forces and targets in neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia.

Al-Shabaab adheres to the same global Islamist ideology as Al-Qaeda and has made several public statements pledging allegiance to the group and praising its leaders. The group has issued several threats to strike also outside Africa, including American and European targets.  

The US military's Africa Command head, Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the US military's air campaign against Al-Shabaab in Somalia will not stop the jihadists and at the end of the day, these air strikes are not going to defeat Al-Shabaab.” The bottom line is that the Somali national army needs to grow, it needs to step up and it needs to take responsibility for their own security, he added.

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18 Fatiha Belfakir, Experts: Kenyan attack sign of Al-Shabab resilience, VOA, January 16, 2019.


The Red Sea is one of the world’s most important trading routes for global commerce between Europe and Asia. If passage through the Red Sea is interrupted or threatened, the alternatives are costly with serious impact on the global economy. Protecting the Red Sea and the freedom of navigation are in the vital interests of all countries in the region and the Great Powers and they have to join forces to prevent terror attacks in Djibouti.
ABOUT

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