

Fostering peace and stability

INTERVIEW WITH HE MAHMOUD ALI YOUSSEUF

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MAHMOUD ALI YOUSSEUF obtained his BA in Djibouti, and continued his studies in France in Applied Foreign Languages before beginning his professional career at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. He was appointed Ambassador of the Republic of Djibouti to Egypt and permanent representative to the League of Arab States in 1997. In 2001, he became Deputy Minister for International Cooperation and Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in May 2005.

To what extent does Djibouti's diplomacy contribute to the development of the country?

Within the framework of cooperation for economic and social development, diplomacy offers Djibouti multiple opportunities to mobilise financial resources from bilateral and multilateral partners. It should be emphasised that our foreign-based development policy is not limited solely to financing social projects; we also put special emphasis on the investment component. Over the last four years, both bilaterally and multilaterally, Djibouti has mobilized funding of about \$2 billion, devoted primarily to the implementation of more than 80 socio-economic projects. Infrastructure projects in the context of regional and structural development projects and economic integration have also been initiated with financial support. At the bilateral level, our foreign policy is marked by the establishment of strategic partnerships to mobilise more substantial funding for the development of our human resources and our infrastructure. Through partners such as India, France, the United States, South Korea, Iran, Italy, and Germany, significant financial resources and programmes have been mobilised, for the most part as gifts.

At the multilateral level, the Republic of Djibouti has been able to engage in productive discussions for project funding, for example, from the European Union, and also within the context of the UNDAF United Nations program for the years 2012-2017.

The European Union has more than doubled its aid to Djibouti. All these funds are intended mainly to fund projects for socio-economic development in the areas of water, including a desalination project. Energy, health, education and infrastructure are other areas where we have benefitted. In addition, other projects funded by partners are in progress such as the proposed new Djibouti-Ethiopia railway, an iron ore project, and the dock at Goubet funded by China, as well the Tadjourah port project AFESD, along with a road linking Tadjourah and Balho financed by the Kuwaiti Fund, and road equipment supplied by Japan. Other projects funded by China are programmed, such as the construction of a major airport in Djibouti, the construction of a regional hospital of international standards and a five-star hotel.

One of the major pillars of our development-focused diplomacy is our successful partnership with the Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC). Under the Arab bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreement, we have mobilised considerable financial resources. In terms of Arab investments, significant achievements include plans for a new cement factory in the PK12 industrial area to be built by the Nael & Bin Harmal Group.

Djibouti is heavily dependent on imports. What are the major goods you buy abroad?

We import 90 per cent of our consumed products and our top three imports are food, fuel and building materials (cement, steel and ceramics). Djibouti's economy is mainly based on services but we don't believe that building the foundation of a good economy can be done through services only. We need to be self-sufficient in terms of food crops. We also need to develop small-scale industries; Djibouti has created a regional centre for livestock export. The fishing industry's potential also needs to be developed and it has not been fully exploited at a large scale. There is a project in the northern part of the country looking at the development of fish farms in partnership with Malaysian and Indonesian companies.

What is the role of Djiboutian diplomacy in promoting peace and stability in the region?

It should be noted that our diplomacy is based on promoting peace, good relations with our neighbours, and partnerships. For more than two decades, the Horn of Africa has suffered political and military tensions. We are convinced that our security is linked to, and the consolidation of, the principle of collective security and the Republic of Djibouti has relentlessly pursued a diplomacy of peace and stability in Somalia. In this regard our country has deployed troops in Beledweyne under AMISOM and at Somali police training sites.

Djibouti's role as the headquarters of Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is essential for the peace and security of the region. We have also presided over the African Union. Our country has greatly contributed to the promotion of peace and security in the continent.

Through IGAD, Djibouti is currently involved in the stabilisation of South Sudan. IGAD has deployed a team of observers to monitor the implementation of the ceasefire between the rebels and the government

there. The last IGAD summit held in Addis Ababa decided to send IGAD forces to protect certain sensitive sites such as oil facilities, as well as a team of observers responsible for the implementation of the ceasefire teams.

Our main capital resource is stability and we are trying hard to preserve that stability through a good foreign policy. However, it is difficult to feel safe when you have troubles in neighbouring countries. Djibouti is not only protecting its own borders, but also working on stabilising neighbouring countries. Somalia's security situation is improving and there is no major problem between Somaliland and Djibouti, but the southern part of Somalia needs to be stabilised.

What is the purpose of the presence of foreign military forces Djibouti?

Our diplomatic efforts are particularly focused on the fight against terrorism, piracy, human trafficking and all the phenomena caused by the crisis in the Horn of Africa. Our country has become the nerve centre of the international coalition engaged in the fight against piracy. In addition to French and American forces stationed in Djibouti, the European Union, under Operation Atalanta, along with several other partners, such as the self-defence forces of Japan and the Singaporean Air Force have entered into agreements with our country. Djibouti also home to the headquarters of EuCAP Nestor, the largest civilian mission to strengthen regional maritime capacities, financed by the European Union.

Preventing the financing of terrorism and money laundering are priorities and add to the range of measures taken by our country and to fight against terrorism in all its forms.

Maritime security is a concern for shipping companies and oil-producing countries in the Middle East. How has Djibouti supported the important fight against piracy?

Djibouti has always been a key player in the collective security of the international community. The main maritime routes pass through Bab El Mendab. As piracy has increased, we have also volunteered to host European operations. We are trying to provide our services to help international naval forces fight piracy. The country has also further strengthened its coast guard and developed sophisticated radar systems to assess risks in territorial waters.

What are the financial projections and investment trends for Djibouti over the next five years?

The overall investment package that will be invested in Djibouti over the next five years is close to \$8 billion. Apart from foreign direct investment, we are supported


by soft loans and concessional loans from Arab funds. Loans from the Exim banks of China, Turkey and Iran are also a part of this. As much as there is a need to diversify partnerships with other countries, we feel the need to build our own investments in strategic sectors like energy, water supply, and logistics.

What is the current state of relations between Djibouti and Anglophone countries in general and Britain in particular? How do you plan on developing these relations in the years ahead?

The Republic of Djibouti has a good relationship in general with the Anglo-Saxon countries such as the United States, Australia and Canada and the Anglophone African countries.

A Business Forum now exists with Britain to increase awareness among the British-based investment community. There have been several visits by Djibouti parliamentarians and British politicians, such as the Minister for Africa, Mark Simmonds.

The President of the Republic of Djibouti participated in the international conference on Somalia in London. On the sidelines of the conference, I met with Foreign Secretary William Hague and we explored the ways and means to strengthen bilateral relations between our two countries.

The prospects for consolidating this cooperation lie in large part in the use of English for business transactions Djibouti. Djibouti is creating a Commercial Court based on Common Law to facilitate trade disputes between Djibouti and English-speaking countries. 

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HE Mahmoud Ali Youssef meets with Rt Hon William Hague MP, Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

