

**HOW FRANCE UNDERMINED THE AFAR MAJORITY AND  
GRADUALLY IMPOSED THE MINORITY RULE OF THE ISSA TO  
MAINTAIN ITS COLONIAL AND NEO-COLONIAL GRIP ON THE  
TERRITORY OF DJIBOUTI**

*The Shifting Policies of Divide and Rule  
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# 1. An Outline

## 1.1 *The introduction*

Before the arrival of colonial powers in the Horn of Africa, people lived under separate traditional rules in the area. The first best known in the regions was Ifat which was gradually absorbed into the Adal States then followed by different entities through time until the arrival of colonial powers into the areas and created what became known as separate countries.

France needed its toehold in the Red Sea after Britain and Italy created their own colonies in the area. It found a vacuum between the two colonial entities, called first Obock protectorate, then French Somaliland, then the Territory of the Afar and Issa and finally as the Djibouti Republic. This was an intentional step toward its divide and rule policy, beginning where they settled as a completely Afar territory but gradually called it a Somali Coast. These developments paralleled policy changes while shifting to Afar and Issa territory and finally calling it the Djibouti Republic. But this shifting was not an innocent one and was followed by policy measures that ultimately distanced the majority Afar and marginalized their area to underdevelopment, which suppressed major Afar political elements and neutralized them without any significance to influence in the territory.

This contributed to the minority Issa becoming influential, increasing its political and economic influence, whereas Afar was pushed aside. Gradually united Issa Somalis got ample opportunities of their interests which coincided with that of the colonial one. On the other hand, France completed its divided and rule policy mission by handing over the government power to the Issa Somalis while denying the Afar their legitimate position in the territory.

The Issa dominant new government continued with the same line furnished by the France colonial power and consolidated far beyond to this day. France's colonial policy helped the neocolonial policy to continue as well. Now, this policy is shown to involve more former colonial power and invites other international powers to establish their military base in Djibouti and secure their government from powerful external elements. This article aims to describe and analyze the process of the policy of shifting, which helped colonialism and neocolonialism, which led to suppression to continue to this day.

## ***1.2 The Land and the People***

***The Indigenous Afar settlement:*** Before the arrival of European colonialist powers into the area, the Issa and the Afar had no geographic or political connection. Meanwhile, the Afar was the only ethnic group that resided and dominated the political economy of the area. It had its own entity and political tradition of the time. Things had to change at the arrival of colonialism.

During this time, France searched for a safe way to their Eastern Asian colonies. The first contact in the Red Sea by France was made to Afar leaders in Obock, which was called the protectorate. Afterward it was endorsed through the first agreement signed with France. This agreement was done against the background of the earlier experience with the Turco Egyptian expedition which was eliminated by Awsa Afar forces in 1887. The Afar feared the vengeance action from the Red Sea.

Before this time, there was no colonial experience in the area, and nobody knew what it meant by colonialism either, but protection sounded a better alternative for accepting the agreement by then. Although it was cleared as it was a protectorate agreement, the people did not understand why the colonial power dictated their terms of reference and were pressured to pay taxes, leading to conflicts between the local people and the colonial power.

***The Issa-Somali Intrusion:*** The presence of the Issa Somali inside Djibouti came about with the emergency of colonial rule in the area. At the arrival of colonial power, the Issa Somali was settled beyond Borama and was included in the treaty of British protection agreement. Gradually the Issa headed into Ethiopia in search of grazing areas with the agreement of Emperor Haile Selassie, and in Djibouti managed to be included in the agreement with colonial France. The interest between France and the Issa's coincided because the Afar native opposed both parties for their territorial intrusion. The colonial power intentionally attracted the Issa-Somali immigrants from Somalia into Djibouti to favor and counteract the native Afar by including changing the area's name to France Somaliland.

The Afar withdrawal from Zeila areas and the introduction of boundaries limited the movement of the Afar. But encouraged the Issa-Somali migration into Djibouti and appealed to be in search of work opportunities in Djibouti. Thus, the Issa-Somali settlement gradually dominated around Zeila and across the border of Djibouti into Ali Sabieh at that time, where they consolidated their settlement.

However, after independence, their presence was boosted, which grew to a District level and gradually stretched as far as Djibouti and Dikhil in the south.

Today, it is not surprising that the Issa could claim a small fraction of the territory and the whole Djibouti as belonging to the Issa's in general and that of the Mamasan subclan in particular by claiming even beyond the border into Awash Valley inside Ethiopia.

### ***1.3 The Remote History of the Area***

***The Ifat Sultanate:*** Ifat Sultanate (1285–1415) was an Islamic emirate that appeared in the Shewa in Central Ethiopia. Through close contacts with the Arabic Peninsula for centuries, the Afar ethnic group in the region became among the first populations on the African side of the continent to embrace Islam.

The Ifat Sultanate was a medieval Muslim kingdom in the Horn of Africa. Founded in 1285 by the Walashma dynasty, it was extended into Zeila. A lengthy war with the Highland Ethiopian Christians exhausted the Muslim Sultanate of Shewa to decline and finally defeated by the Christian Emperor Amde Seyon I of Ethiopia in 1332, withdrew from Shewa, and was absorbed by a bigger sultanate of Adal.

***The Adal sultanate:*** The Adal state was the most well-known case of those who tried to unite the people into the area. Approximate extension of the state of Adal 1415–1577 was centered around Zeila, Harar and declined in Awsa year 1672. By then, the southern Afar population inhabited the area from Zeila up to Awsa. This Sultanate was known for incorporating ethnic groups under the Islamic direction against the Christian groups in the west of the area. The struggle was kept to the North and western end of what was known as Abyssinia by then. The polity at the time was an Emirate in the larger Adal Sultanate ruled, consisting of Afar and Afarized Arabs. They also led over the similarly established Sultanate to the North and west. Adal's history from this founding period forth would be characterized by a succession of battles with neighbouring Abyssinia. The best-known leader of Adal was named Gurale Hamad, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi. After its successful attack, it was declined to Harar and ended in Awsa in 1734.

***Ottoman Empire:*** The decline of Adal gave the way open for another powerful ruler which became known as the Ottoman Empire in 1566, particularly since 1577, to 1821 and 1841, led by Muhammad Ali, Pasha of Egypt, came to control Yemen, Harar, Gulf of Tadjoura included Zeila which then was ruled by an Afar chief called Abubaker Basha who controlled both the city and the trade routes into the inner side of the area.

The Turko-Egyptian attempt through Afar into Abyssinia's defeat brought a power vacuum for the colonial power to venture into the area. One of the final marks of the Turco Egyptian relations was that of the loss in Gamari of Awsa by the forces of Sultan Illalta, which changed the power balance in the area in favor of European interests. Relation in the area, the French seized the opportunity to introduce colonialism in the area immediately.

## **2. The Shifting policy of the colony**

France managed to gain a foothold at Obock before it expanded into Tadjourah, the west and the southern parts of the territory known today as the Djibouti Republic. Until it became independent in 1977, France ran directly; colonial policy shifted now and then. The changing policy continued even after independence, as a rule, was unfairly handed over to the minority Issa who mismanaged and exploited the heritage of the old colonial policy of France.

### ***2.1 The Establishment of a Colony***

In 1888, the French colony of Obock protectorate was established through the agreement of France with Afar. The agreement stemmed from the earlier Turco Egypt conflict in 1887. However, the conflict again continued between Afar and colonial France about what the relations would look like. Colonial France foresaw the growing dispute between the two parties. It was forced to search for other alternatives to the counter-balancing factor that would affect the colony's position in the territory in the future. The move of its headquarters to the present place of Djibouti and its railway project was technically supported by the convenience of the plain topography for the railway and deep port of position in the Red Sea situation and the shortcut to central Ethiopia.

### ***2.2 The First Shift from Obock to Djibouti***

In 1888, the French protectorate of Obock was established. Still, the protectorate capital was transferred to Djibouti in 1894, probably due to its convenience of the territory and French Somaliland, which meant its headquarters moved from Obock to Djibouti. French colonial power used Obock as the initial step

to continue its expansion westwards into the Horn of Africa. Although the Afar signed all agreements with French colonial power, it had a severe conflict on settlement and expansion into the south and west of the territory. France had agreed to the protection treaty but had to consider better alternatives to keep the area into its colonial entity under different shifting divide and rule policies.

Ultimately, it expanded to the area beyond Rahayta and Tadjourah which were under the same traditional rule and had strong sentiments against colonial desire. With all the difficult situations, the colonial power came with a new plan to include the Issa-Somalis into a territorial agreement, which was incorporated by giving the name to the territory as France cost of the Somali.

As France expanded its colonial administration to Tadjoura and southern frontiers, it got an opportunity for a new factor to reckon with. Through the construction of the port of Djibouti and the transfer of the colony's headquarters from Obock to the new city of Djibouti, a new phase of development started. Since then, the Issa-Somali, who had the experience of working in Barbara Somaliland, managed to enter Djibouti in search of work opportunities and grew rapidly in number with time. The attraction consolidated as the territory named after the French Somali colony. Similarly, the territorial expansion of the Issa-Somali grew rapidly in Djibouti city and Ali Sabieh District.

### ***2.3 The Second Shift***

In the development of the aftermath of the Second World War, the colonial perspective had to be changed for the better. Up to this time, France extended its colonial administration and consolidated its authority framework. During this time, the natives partially had a say in the administration, representing the colonial state. In the 50s and 60s, the political desire was directed towards independence by African in general and the growing Somali nationalism in particular. This forced colonial France in Djibouti to develop better alternatives for the territory.

Politically this period was dominated by the immigrant Somalis attached to the Somali nation in Somalia. The political heritage of Mohammed Harbi dominated the growing party politics in this context, and the unionist mentality as Djibouti became a French overseas territory. In 1946, parallelly things changed as the capital city with its ports and the railway was constructed. With time, the Issa-Somali influx began to reconnect with power balance. While the immigration of Afar into Djibouti city was curtailed, the Issa-Somalis were given the green light into the city. Thus,

the Issa-Somali grew politically by forming political parties to promote its interests in the territory.

Mohamed Harbi, with the Union of Republicans, advocated the unity of Somalis in Djibouti and supported the union with Somalia proper, and won the first election of 1958. This was the high time for Somali nationalists who advocated independence for all Somalis in the Horn of Africa and inside Djibouti. Unfortunately, the intensified struggle led to a referendum organized in 1959, where the Somali claim lost the election. Others advocated the continuation of the French colonial rule and advocated instead with an improved local administration. The failure in the referendum intensified the political struggle to create new dynamism among the Issa-Somali, and the death of Mohamed Harbi led to the split of the Issa-Somali alliance.

The Issa split led by Hassan Gouled with the Issa Democratic Union, dividing the Issa-Somali people into two positions. The immigrant Somalis in Djibouti predominantly supported the unionist party of Mohammed Harbi, whereas the Issas predominantly supported Hassan Gouled and his democratic party. While the former supported the union of Djibouti into Somalia, and the democratic party of the Issa was hesitant to move to the union into Somalia because they worried about their minority position in British Somaliland.

Afar also formed its party, calling it *The Afar Democratic Party*. Meanwhile, the local people got an opportunity to participate in the parliament, where members of the assembly became the local people and the others remained reserved for the French representatives. The political development left the door open to further broader political exercise. The period was sensitive because Somali nationalism grew beyond its territory, and even Djibouti was affected by its impact. Thus, the Issa-Somali were on the same page as the other Somali Nationalist elements who advocated the unity of all Somali-speaking people but was also reserved for a union because its clan was marginalized and suppressed inside Somaliland.

The French colonial power saw the threat of the growing Somali nationalists into Djibouti. It advocated lifting the native's position of the Afar partially and the Issa to fill the Somali gap until the 1963 election again undermined the Somali intention. Until this time, the two native communities were equally marginalized in the national decision-making of the territory. The colonial power exploited the gap and developed a better approach to accommodate the marginalized communities.

## ***2.4 The Third Shift***



The growing Somali nationalism in the area brought about renewed relations between the native Afar, the Issa, and as well as with the French colonial rule, both fearing the growing threat of Somalia. The pro-Somalia unity groups continued with their demands for independence. In contrast, others who were hesitant to independence or unite with Somalia preferred the continued connection with French colonial rule and advocated no to independence. After the referendum failed in 1967, the territory name was revised after the Afar and Issa Territory. This new colonial government was led by Ali Arif Bourhan, who saw that the Issa Somalis, the Afar who were marginalized, were lifted from their previous position included in the national decision making. Ultimately, the failed referendum was held, but the demanding independence block was defeated for good. It was said that the territory was not yet matured for independence.

### ***2.5 The Fourth Shift***

The failed election caused a disturbance in the country. Afar dominated the pro-government leadership, but the native Issa was also involved. These had to continue close to independence. Since the Ali Aref government was thought to be supported by French colonial rule, a new transitional government led by Mohammed Kamil was brought to smooth outgoing Afar and give it a better democratic touch of transition to unity and democracy. This had to include the transitional period up to independence. The Afar was used to smooth the process to independence and finally handed over the government power of independent Djibouti to the Issa groups, which was concluded in the final shifting of direct colonial policy in the territory.

### **3. Independence and Its Aftermath**

#### ***3.1 The Issa Dominated Government***

The territory became the Djibouti republic, dominated by the Issas, who encouraged the influx of Issas into the region, getting work opportunities and social services. Most government positions were shifted to the Issa Somalis and state apparatus. The consequences of the shifting policies were gradually consolidated and continued to undermine the Afar majority, removing them from each critical position in the territory. In reality, the Issa dominated and overtook the government power and kept even other Somali clans at bay. This situation contributed to the marginalization of Afar and led to renewed conflicts between the Issa-dominated government and the Afar opposition forces to this day.

Hassan Gouled led the Issa-dominated government of Djibouti as president, and Ahmad Dini, the prime minister, became a long-time opponent to French colonial rule and with few Afar without any significant position. Purging non-Issa elements from power positions often led to internal government crises, which caused many repetitive government reshuffles. This was followed by emergency and curfew time and again by changing law and order in the territory.

#### ***3.2 The Afar Reaction to Marginalization***

The marginalization has pushed Afar into the corner. Afterward, most of the Afar were hesitant to the domination of the new government by the Issas, even though few of them tried to participate in the political development. But unfortunately, the government did not heed the reaction and the cooperation. Therefore, the prominent personalities resigned. The marginalization forced the Afar opposition to opt for a better alternative and merged into the Restoration and Democracy in Djibouti (FRUD) in 1979, which continues to this today. Unfortunately, this Front turned to Ethiopia to get support, where they operated effectively with time.

Meanwhile, Ethiopia was known as a socialist state which also the FRUD accused of being the left elements. This position affected their popularity not only at home but also among the western international communities. The two-sided block politics then dominated the polarisation of world politics. Unfortunately, even the Afar opposition was accused of aligning itself with the socialist block. FRUD carried out a successful campaign against the Issa government by threatening the security of the capital city of Djibouti. To fight the Afar rebel group, the Djibouti government

exploited the existence of FRUD to mobilize the Issa-Somalis not only from home but also from the neighbouring countries.

### ***3.3 Consolidating the Issa position in Djibouti***

To dominate the territory, the government changed the election law several times. Practically there is no multiparty politics, but one party that has stayed in power since independence in 1977. Ismail Omar Guelle was the one who replaced Hassan Gouled at his death and led the dominant and forcefully carried out assimilation and suppression politics in Djibouti. He was an Ethiopian born, grew in Ethiopia, and joined development through clan affiliation to his sub-clan of Mammasan, which made him known both locally and regionally in the Horn of Africa.

His double role as the Somalis while threatened by the Afar and remaining a member of the Massan while threatened by other Somali clans put him in a delicate position. This is true also for his relationship with neighbouring countries, while threatened by the Somali nation claims, remained to keep balance the situation with Ethiopia and involve its policy in the mess of the Somali trouble. His troublesome domestic politics with the clandestine involvement in the neighbouring countries' internal affairs may never help him rely on all protagonists involved in the area.

### ***3.4 The Issa Latent Involvement Across Ethiopia***

The clandestine involvement of Djibouti into the Afar of Ethiopia took its time to be publicly noticed by the Ethiopian government but gradually exposed through practical operations done regularly across the border. Gradually, Ismail Omar Guelle combined his position inside Djibouti and played a diplomatic role with Ethiopia. This has boosted his support at home and even beyond among the Issa-Somalis in the Horn of Africa. The Issa government in Djibouti has supported Issa inside Ethiopia in the following manner.

***To access the Issa contraband through Djibouti:*** After consolidating its power in Djibouti, the government continued to coordinate its activities towards the Issa inside Ethiopia. The contraband operation has been used as a financial backup to support the intrusion of the Issa Somalis.

***Organize a support task force in Djibouti:*** Initially, both authorities and Issa-Somali individuals were ready to support the backup operation inside Ethiopia, but as Djibouti became solely dominated by the Mammassan other Somali clan

contrabandists were denied access, which caused interest conflict between and among the Issa-Somali groups.

***To carry out an offensive latent diplomatic pressure on Ethiopia:*** The operation was initially led by President Ismael Omar Guelleh, as the Cabinet secretary and security man. Now that he has remained the figurehead as the president of the republic who sees that every element of the operation functions and meets its end. These operations have been coordinated through the Djibouti president's office, referring to himself in his office that Awash concerns the Issas. Besides, the Issa-Somali involvement was exposed when the Somali fighters captured the Afar region. Playing diplomacy support to the Issa case both unofficially and officially remains the priority issue inside Ethiopia.

***To operate for the best strategic option for the Issa and the whole Somali in the Horn of Africa:*** The first step towards this objective was to capture the strategic places of Obno, Undafooand Gadmaytu, where a lot of Somalia mercenaries were stationed through the contraband supervision. The cattle booty captured by the raid are exported, and all contraband loads in Dekle are openly driven into Ethiopia without any formal restrictions.

***The reviewed Issa Somali ambition:*** The concept of Greater Somalia which was coined by Italian colonialists now expired yet after the collapse of Somali which was rather used not only to keep the unity ambition of Somalis intact but also that the unity of the Issa one both inside Somaliland, Djibouti and Ethiopia. Now that the Issue extremist has come up with its parochial clan plan, the choice will be difficult for the Afar and the Somalis trying to patch up all Somalis together.

***The Issa clan is subject to seige:*** This Issa parochialism caused a great schism among the Somalis inside Djibouti, Somaliland, and Ethiopia, where they remain a minority. It would be more challenging to create a national state with narrow clan parochialism in the future.

***The identity crisis of the Issas:*** the Issa origin is traced to Somaliland, where they have been included in the protectorate of British Somaliland. However, they gradually managed to slip into the boundaries of Ethiopia through the agreement with Haile Selassie and Djibouti through the French colonial treaty to check the Afar power in the territory. Their extreme elements wish to rule in every three states though they are a small minority without significant political positions.

Thus, their vision seems to be confused to a great extent. However, the decline of Somalia and its nationalism left the door open to the Issa desire to take advantage of the situation to find its gap with clan extremists. This plan is centered around the city of Djibouti, originated and designed to bring about all the Issas from both Ethiopia and Somaliland and unite them into a *greater Issa state* in the Horn of Africa. In this politics, the Issa have forgotten they share Djibouti with the majority Afar and the same with that of Ethiopian. Their idea of Greater Issa has been

backfiring in Djibouti and Somalia, where their identity is flexible in looking for their advantage. However, the Issa clan will do everything possible to accommodate its interest in domestic politics and bargain to keep their interest intact.

#### **4. The Geopolitical Gript on Djibouti**

Throughout the history of humankind, migrating in different directions, has been the natural behaviour of human beings. As the Afar area is shown to be where the roots of humanity arise, the archaeologists disclosed that first-person Lucy, who was 3.4 million years old, was founded and considered that humans spread around the world from this point of departure. The oral tradition has it that people from both sides of Africa and Asia may have migrated from the Bab El Mandeb, which may have been nearer than it was in the remote past.

The development of transportation and interests of different powers of the world may have exposed its importance and imposed and preserved its interest. These interest conflicts brought about competitive desire in politics, and economic interaction may ultimately be based on a security interest in the areas.

##### ***4.1 The Nature of the Geopolitical Position***

The geographic position of the Bab-el-Mandeb at the end of the Red Sea made the territory of Djibouti as the strategic magnet of the area. This is a natural channel that brings Africa close to the Asian continent. As it is known, France may have understood its strategic significance already by then and got hold of it for good. The distance between the two continents is regarded to be 5,609 km which is believed to have been a crossroad for humanity in the remote past to and from East Africa.

Its strategic position was considered high when the Suez Canal was opened and followed by the two world wars, where all international transport from the Suez Canal had to pass by this strategic point. The polarization of the world, after the second world war increased its strategic importance even more. After its occupation of Djibouti as the territory of its colony, France became a watchdog of the Red Sea with its military base at Bab El Mandeb.

Later, this was consolidated by NATO and significant powers of the world, making it about five major military bases affiliated with varied interests. Today all the Military of the world are stationed in this tiny country, formally never involved in its domestic politics of the territory, but undoubtedly supply considerable resources to the local government and secure the well-being of the ruling minority government.

Today it is the only territory that accommodates so many military bases under the same government umbrella of Djibouti. The question is do they have any legitimate right to uphold such a dictator to stay in power this long. External powers have helped the dictator survive politically and economically without any significant threat, both internally and externally in the Horn of Africa.

***The Negligence of Human Rights in Djibouti by International Communities:*** The International Communities think that all those countries holding their military bases in the territory seem to neglect the critical human rights situation inside Djibouti city or outside in the rural areas of the territory. All the surrounding areas of the military bases of these forces are backward and lack basic facilities of amenities. Not surprisingly, these have been designed and kept marginalized under the French shifting policy of the past rule. These state policies continued as the Issas took over the government position, and the Afar remained marginalized.

To suppress the people in Djibouti, the Issa government did everything in its capacity to reverse the power balance between the two communities. For instance, they became members of the Arab league, lulled the Egyptian government to get support for its repression, and manipulated their position for its self-interest in the Horn of Africa.

The Arabs forgot that the Afar was the first to accept Islam in Africa through the first Hijra and that the Arabs were their nearest neighbors before they became better off through oil income. The suppression continued as the Issa consolidated its position in the territory after independence. The silencing has accompanied this by brutal suppression of law and order, including changing election law in the territory. The question is, how could the well-off countries with the best human rights record ignore the gross human rights violation at their doorstep.

## 5. Recommendation

The Babel El Mandeb is known for its tragedy in the past, where thousands of people and transport perished. Under the formation of the state and the current administration, it should have better opportunities for development around these areas. All those countries involved in the military settlement regarding the strategic position of the region need to consider the critical situation of the people who inhabit the surrounding environment:

- *To consider the situation around its district and assess the living condition and appraise their need of facilities,*
- *To share the projects among those involved to facilitate the gap for the population,*
- *To give particular attention to rural areas in general and provide specific attention to those serious in poverty condition in Djibouti, and*
- *To disclose the critical situation of the people to the international communities at large.*

## 6. Concluding Remarks

The political history of the Horn of Africa has been very much conflictual. In the past, the Afar people and their land were centered around the conflict from Ifat and Adal up to the Ottoman empire. These people were systematically neutralized by dividing them into different states and remained as minorities in the newly created countries. Based, on the scramble for Africa, the territory of Djibouti has formed with French colonial policies with all the political swings. Initially, the French interest was safeguarding the passage for its colonial settlements in the far south Asian colonies. Still, gradually, this was considered consolidated as development in the world continued. To sustain its superiority in the region, France has maintained its presence to this day.

As the French captured Djibouti as a colony, parallelly saw to it that it continued its presence in the area both politically and militarily. To achieve this objective, marginalized the native Afar and kept underdeveloped their area. The colonial policy formulated by former colonial power continued as Djibouti became independent, gradually becoming the captive of the international military bases. Conversely, this has restored the worst dictator of the territory to survive financially and securely, while the local people had to suffer.

The milestone in this development is France which first got its toehold in the area and established its colonial rule, favoring one ethnic group of the minority over the majority. The Issa dominated government power; it aligned itself with other Somali clan groups to keep its marginalization and suppression in the territory. The presence of significant world military bases could only balance the power in the international context. Still, it sustains the miss balance between the two communities in the country even in the future.

The question is, why do most people of the Afar that is over 90 percent surrounding Bab el Mands pushed aside, be marginalized first by French colonial rule, and then handed over power to the Issa-dominated government. However, the international community has the moral obligation to oppose suppression and dictatorship.

Finally, the Issa extremist's double standard and confusing identity should not mislead the international community to delusion. I argue when Ismael Oumar Guell disappears from the country's political scene and wonder what would happen to the confused vacuum created and leftover in Djibouti in general and that of the Mamassan in particular. Even more difficult to foresee, the future position of major military bases in the country.

**The end**