



**“Djibouti and the 2011 Arab uprisings”**

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Course: “Sociology of International Relations in the Arab  
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**Sociology of International Relations in the Arab World**  
(Seminar by Dr. Laurent Bonnefoy)

Paper: **Djibouti and the 2011 Arab uprisings**

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## 1. Introduction : No Spring in Djibouti

On October, 27th 2017 an article written by exiled Djibouti author Abdourahman Waberi drew attention on the bloody repression that occurred in Tadjourah, north of the country.<sup>1</sup> Almost seven years after the wave of popular uprisings which shook the Arab world, close to nothing has changed in Djibouti. Interestingly enough, the analysts of the so-called “Arab Spring” have completely ignored the case of this state as large as Kuwait.

This dearth of literature should not mean that there haven't been political contestations at all in this country. When the “Arab Spring” occurred in Tunisia, some even thought (or hoped) that it would spread up to Djibouti.<sup>2</sup> President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh considered that the growing contestations had nothing to do with the Tunisian situation. The notion of “spring” does not even exist in Islam, he declared with a touch of irony.<sup>3</sup> One should then prefer the term “uprising”. Moreover, given the variety of social situations and local dynamics of contestations that occurred in 2011 from Tunisia to Qatar<sup>4</sup> and Yemen<sup>5</sup>, it seems more appropriate to consider the plurality of *uprisings*. Hence the following question : Why did the Arab uprisings not spread to Djibouti?

Our discussion builds on the work of Osman Antwi-Boateng<sup>6</sup> who identifies factors facilitating the “domino effect” of uprisings, along with factors (external and internal) hindering this effect. This author distinguishes four generations in the academic literature on revolutions and uprisings. A first generation sought to explain, describe and detail political turmoils (Gustave Le Bon). A second generation raised the question of why and when revolutions occur - stemming from social behavior approaches, psychology, and political science (Ted Gurr, Theda Skocpol). A third generation was rooted in marxist approach, giving a crucial importance to class conflicts. Last but not least the fourth generation highlights the dynamics of revolutions and social movements through the concept of “*contentious politics*” coined by Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly. The academic literature of the 2011 uprisings is mostly entrenched in the fourth generation.

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<sup>1</sup> WABERI Abdourahman, “Djibouti : Les dictatures jouissent d'une grande impunité pour peu qu'elles soient utiles et stables”, November, 1st 2017  
[http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/01/djibouti-les-dictatures-jouissent-d-une-grande-impunite-pour-peu-qu-elles-soient-utiles-et-stables\\_5208871\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2017/11/01/djibouti-les-dictatures-jouissent-d-une-grande-impunite-pour-peu-qu-elles-soient-utiles-et-stables_5208871_3212.html)

<sup>2</sup> Le Nouvel Observateur, “A Djibouti, l'opposition dans les pas du modèle tunisien”, February, 22nd 2011  
<http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/les-revolutions-arabes/20110222.OBS8489/a-djibouti-l-opposition-dans-les-pas-du-modele-tunisien.html>

TV5 Monde, “Djibouti gagné par les printemps arabes ?”, March, 4th 2011  
<http://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/djibouti-gagne-par-les-printemps-arabes-4046>

<sup>3</sup> Interview on French television channel TV5 Monde on December 5th, 2013. The interview is available at:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9Sck0K3\\_Wc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9Sck0K3_Wc) (from minute 10'00).

<sup>4</sup> COATES ULRICHSEN, Kristian, *Qatar and the Arab Spring*, London : Hurst, 2014

<sup>5</sup> BONNEFOY, Laurent, “Les révolutions sont-elles exportables ? L'effet domino à la lumière du cas yéménite, *Mouvements*, 2011/2, n°66, pp 110-116.

<sup>6</sup>ANTWI-BOATENG, Osman. “No Spring in Africa: How Sub-Saharan Africa Has Avoided the Arab Spring Phenomenon”, *Politics & Policy*, 43(5), 2015, pp. 754-784.

This paper defends the hypothesis that in the peculiar case of Djibouti the obsession of stability hindered the domino effect of uprisings. Apart from the literature on Arab uprisings, our reflection stems from two interviews conducted with specialists of Djibouti<sup>7</sup>, official sources from French administrations, UN documentation, NGO reports, newspapers articles and websites sources. The ambition of our discussion is threefold. On the empirical dimension, this paper tries to shed light on the domestic situation in Djibouti. Generally speaking, this State remains studied through the mere prism of extraversion, at the expense of its domestic politics. On the theoretical dimension, it intends to show how Djibouti offers a framework for testing the “domino effect” of uprisings. On the methodological dimension, this paper seeks to open a discussion on the very delineation of regional areas, inasmuch as Djibouti is a blind spot in the literature on the Arab world as well as in African studies.

## **2. Djibouti : an ideal candidate for popular uprisings ?**

### ***2.1. An authoritarian situation since 1977***

Djibouti proclaimed its independence from France on June, 27th 1977. The first President, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, led the country for twenty-two years, and was replaced in 1999 by his nephew, and closest advisor Ismaïl Omar Guelleh (also known as IOG). The latter is currently conducting his fourth presidential term - after the amendment of the constitution in 2010. He was the only candidate running for the 2005 and 2011 presidential elections, since the opposition decided to exit the campaigns. In 2016, IOG said he was “forced by the people of Djibouti” not to leave power.<sup>8</sup>

Moreover the opposition has never been successful in forming a solid coalition. According to journalist Tristan Coloma, when an opponent emerges and represents too much of a hassle for the government, a political opportunity is suddenly offered to this newcomer. As a matter of fact this strategy of cooptation has proved certainly efficient in 1997 elections, resulting in the governmental “coalition” (allied with the FRUD opposition) that won the entirety of the sixty-five seats of the unicameral parliament. A recent example involves French-Djiboutian Alexis Mohamed who used to chair the opposition party *Mouvement des Républicains Solidaires*<sup>9</sup>, and works now for President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Sonia Le Gouriellec is a specialist of the Horn of Africa. She works for the Institute of strategic research of the Ecole Militaire (IRSEM). Interview conducted on October, 11th at the Ecole militaire, Paris.

Tristan Coloma is chief editor at The Indian Ocean Letter (Africa Intelligence group). Interview conducted on October 23rd 2017, Paris.

<sup>8</sup> Jeune Afrique, “Les Djiboutiens m’ont interdit de partir”, March 29th 2016

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/311365/politique/ismaïl-omar-guelleh-djiboutiens-mont-interdit-de-partir/>

<sup>9</sup> COLLIN, Jean-Marie, “Questions à Alexis Mohamed, président du MRS”, Alternatives Economiques, February 19th, 2013

<https://blogs.alternatives-economiques.fr/collin/2013/02/19/questions-a-alexis-mohamed-president-du-mouvement-des-republicains-solidaires-mrs>

<sup>10</sup> Africa 24, “L’invité du Jour avec Alexis Mohamed, chargé de mission du Président de la République de Djibouti”, February 25th 2016

<http://www.africa24tv.com/fr/linvite-du-jour-avec-alexis-mohamed-charge-de-mission-du-president-de-la-republique>

To Tristan Coloma - now *persona non grata* in Djibouti due to his activities - the conventional political game is locked for the opposition. He points out that Djibouti politics are plagued with a strong personalisation of power around the figure of IOG whose portraits and initials are written on caps, stickers, T-shirts, and have become part of everyday life.



Furthermore the *Survie* report on 2016 elections mentions the Gabode prison as common place for torture on political convicts.<sup>11</sup> In France, Jean-Loup Schaal, who lived seven years in Djibouti, denounces human rights violations *via* the *Association pour le Respect des Droits de l'Homme à Djibouti*.<sup>12</sup> Famous author and thinker Abdourahman Waberi is one example of political exiles who contribute to internationalise this cause.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the Afars have remained at the margin of politics since 1977, even though they reside on 90% of the territory. This situation has worsened with the negotiations for independence, when Ali Aref (Afar) and Hassan Gouled Aptidon (Issa) competed to lead the nation. The former being considered too radical by the French minister of Cooperation Olivier Stirn, the power was eventually given to the Issas.<sup>14</sup> Between 1991 and 1993 the Issa government opposed a latent armed opposition from the *Front pour la Restauration de l'Unité et de la Démocratie* (FRUD) led by the Afar Ahmed Dini. Within two years, the number of military spendings skyrocketed by 300% and contributed to 30% of the budget deficit. Today, Houssein Ibrahim Houmed calls the Afars the "palestinians of the Horn of Africa".<sup>15</sup> Samson Bezabeh shows that a whole part of the population in Djibouti is denied the accessibility to State services.<sup>16</sup> The *Indian Ocean Letter* calls "family web"<sup>17</sup> the practice of power by President IOG, who governs with his closest relatives and members of his

<sup>11</sup>Survie, "La coopération militaire française au service des dictatures", April, 4th 2016, p. 27

<sup>12</sup> See <http://www.ardhd.org/>

<sup>13</sup> Claire Beaugrand showed how the Bahraini opposition in exile built an "international front" for democratisation. See BEAUGRAND, Claire, "In and Out Moves of the Bahrain Opposition : How years of political exile led to the opening of an international front during the 2011 crisis in Bahrain" in Abdulhadi Khalaf (ed.) *Transit States. Labour, Migration and Citizenship in the Gulf*, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> French diplomatic archives, La Courneuve, Direction Africaine et Malgache, Djibouti (1973-1977) 49QONT/11, Questions militaires armées armement.

<sup>15</sup> IBRAHIM HOUMED Houssein "Les Afars sont toujours colonisés à Djibouti", February, 6th 2017 <http://atelier.rfi.fr/profiles/blogs/le-27-juin-2015-les-afars-sont-toujours-colonises-a-djibouti-par->

<sup>16</sup> BEZABEH, Samson, "Citizenship and the logic of sovereignty in Djibouti", *African Affairs* 110, n°441, 2011, pp. 587-606.

<sup>17</sup> See The Indian Ocean Letter, "Comment Ismaïl Omar Guelleh gouverne avec sa famille", June, 19th 2015 <https://www.africaintelligence.fr/loi/insiders/djibouti/2015/06/19/comment-ismail-omar-guelleh-gouverne-en-famille-avec-kadra-naguib-saad-et-les-autres/108078582-be1>

clan (Issa/Mamassan). Political scientist Sonia Le Gouriellec insisted on the influence of First lady Kadra Mahamoud Haïd in domestic politics.<sup>18</sup>

From an economic standpoint, Djibouti has an inflating public debt (from 50% in 2014 to 85% in 2016). More than a fifth of the total population is extremely poor, and the country was ranked 170th worldwide for its Human Development Index.<sup>19</sup> The UNESCO has declared the situation of children in Djibouti to be 'abject'. In 2010, barely 10% of children had a shelter in rural areas.<sup>20</sup> The benefits of foreign investments are not redistributed to the population and the growing corruption is a sign of a breathless regime, says Tristan Coloma.

## ***2.2. Domestic factors hindering the spread of arab uprisings***

Having the aforementioned factors in mind, one could see some similarities with Arab countries in which uprisings triggered in 2011. Though the regime of IOG did not teeter, it is a misnomer that Djibouti experienced no contestation in 2011.<sup>21</sup> Osman Antwi-Boateng seeks to understand why the diffusion of arab uprisings did not spread up to sub-saharan Africa.<sup>22</sup> He argues that six domestic factors hindered the "domino-effect" in this region : the use of disaster narratives by governments, pseudo-democratic mechanisms, the existence of liberation regime, instability fatigue, poor telecommunication facilities, and ethnolinguistic diversity. Do these internal factors contribute to explain why the regime in Djibouti did not shake?

First, the use of disaster narrative is common in Djibouti politics. Since 2001, IOG justifies security measures in the sake of a global war on terror, especially against *Al-Shabaab* organisation acting in Somalia. In November 2015, he declared a state of emergency in Djibouti following terror attacks that occurred in Paris and Bamako. The rhetoric of the struggle against terrorism has been instrumentalized by IOG, following what political scientist Jean-François Bayart calls the "liberation of conditionalities" used to justify authoritarian enclaves in democratic regimes.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See also ALI Deberkale, "Djibouti : Kadra Haïd, une première dame influente", Association culture et progrès, 2014, pp. 1-8

<sup>19</sup> Ambassade de France en Ethiopie et auprès de l'Union Africaine, "Note sur la situation économique et financière de Djibouti en 2016", service économique pour l'Ethiopie et Djibouti, 12 juillet 2017, 2 p.

<sup>20</sup> United Nations News Center, "Djibouti : les enfants dans une pauvreté abjecte selon l'UNICEF", June, 15th 2010

<http://www.un.org/apps/newsFr/storyF.asp?NewsID=22185&Cr=Djibouti&Cr1#.Wg842EriaUk>

<sup>21</sup> Courrier International, "Djibouti. Le vent de contestation gagne", February 21st, 2011

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/breve/2011/02/21/le-vent-de-contestation-gagne>

Radio France International, "En dépit des arrestations, la contestation ne faiblit pas à Djibouti", February 19th, 2011 <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20110219-depit-arrestations-contestation-faiblit-pas-djibouti>

Le Monde, "A Djibouti, le pouvoir tente d'étouffer la contestation", March 8th, 2011

[http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/03/08/a-djibouti-le-pouvoir-tente-d-etouffer-la-contestation\\_1845079\\_3210.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2013/03/08/a-djibouti-le-pouvoir-tente-d-etouffer-la-contestation_1845079_3210.html)

<sup>22</sup> Caveat : this argument is to be taken carefully. For instance, Chena and Tisseron show that the regime of Amadou Toumani Touré in Mali failed as an immediate consequence of the Libyan uprising. See CHENA, Salim, TISSERON, Antonin, 'Rupture d'équilibres au Mali: Entre instabilité et recompositions', *Afrique contemporaine*, n°245, 2013 pp. 71-84.

<sup>23</sup> BAYART, Jean-François « Effets d'aubaine. Les régimes autoritaires libérés des conditionnalités », *Critique internationale*, 14, janvier 2002, pp. 7-11.

Second, Djibouti has experienced a certain opening of its institutions in the nineties, when a limited multipartism was allowed. This opening gave the visage of a democratisation process. This is what Antwi-Boateng calls “pseudo-democratic mechanisms”. Third, the current regime in Djibouti may still be regarded as a liberation one - given that IOG was actively involved in the decolonisation phase. Antwi-Boateng argues that “the public still regards these regimes as liberators and patriots for their heroism and sacrifices against colonialism and imperialism. Any rebellion against such regimes thus risks being labeled as dishonoring the sacrifices of the founding founders”.<sup>24</sup>

Fourth, after the years experience of armed opposition between the FRUD and the government, Djibouti citizens may feel an instability fatigue. According to journalist Tristan Coloma, people may fear the instability that they observe in neighboring countries such as Somalia, Yemen, and Eritrea entangled in political violence. In addition, Sonia Le Gouriellec highlights that the strategy of the government of Djibouti in order to preserve social peace consists in providing tons of khats to the people. Khat is a plant, classified as a drug by the UN Convention on psychotropic substances (1972). The plant is chewed by males to stimulate intellectual thinking, reduce hunger, and keep awake.<sup>25</sup> The consumption of Khat has been an usual social activity for a while in the Horn of Africa.<sup>26</sup> A French blogger who lived in Djibouti explains that Khat is part of everyday activities in the country, and that it induces a certain apathy for its users.<sup>27</sup>

Fifth, telecommunication facilities and media penetration in Djibouti aren't as developed as in most Arab countries. The only authorized media - *La Nation* and *Radio Télévision Djibouti* - are tightly controlled by the state. Scholars have emphasized the crucial role of transnational media such as *Al-Jazeera*<sup>28</sup> and social media in the constitution of a common cultural identity. The minor importance of foreign media covering the situation in Djibouti may also explain the poor diffusion of uprisings in this State, according to Aly Verjee.<sup>29</sup>

Sixth, the fragmentation between Afar and Issa communities - as was mentioned in the previous section - may have hindered the “domino-effect”. Djibouti is not an Arab country in ethnic terms. Admittedly, Djibouti shares a number of similarities with countries of the Arab world: it is part of the Arab League, it is composed of a huge majority of sunni muslims<sup>30</sup>, and the economic ties

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<sup>24</sup>ANTWI-BOATENG, Osman, op. cit. ; p. 769

<sup>25</sup>VOUIN-BIGOT, Isabelle, “*Le Khat en Somalie : réseaux et enjeux*”, Politique africaine, décembre 1995, n°60, pp. 135-142.

<sup>26</sup>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, “The consumption of khat in French Somaliland”, January 1st 1959.

[http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin\\_1959-01-01\\_2\\_page006.html](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/data-and-analysis/bulletin/bulletin_1959-01-01_2_page006.html)

<sup>27</sup>Albane Buriel, le Khat : l’opium du peuple djiboutien au service de la paix nationale”, Médiapart blog, October 29th

2014 <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/albane-buriel/blog/291014/le-khat-l-opium-du-peuple-djiboutien-au-service-de-la-paix-nationale>

See also the novel by Mouna-Hodan AHMED, *Les enfants du Khat*, Sépia, 2016, 192 p.

<sup>28</sup>LYNCH, Mark, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>29</sup>VERJEE, Aly, “A Friendly Little Dictatorship in the Horn of Africa : Why the world doesn't care about Djibouti's autocracy”, Foreign Policy, April 8th 2011

<sup>30</sup>OMAR ABDILLAHI, Aden, “La dimension politique de l’islam à Djibouti”, Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Sécuritaires dans la Corne de l’Afrique, February 2014, 24 p.



with Gulf states are strong.<sup>31</sup> Historian Alain Rouaud shows that the presence of Arabs dates back centuries ago.<sup>32</sup> Yet, Arabs are only a minority (less than 3%) along with Afars (35%) and Issas (60%).<sup>33</sup> The country was still a French colony at the glorious moment of pan-arabism. It would be interesting to explore how Djibouti people identify themselves (either they feel Muslims, Arabs, Africans, Afars,<sup>34</sup> Issas, Somalis) inasmuch as 2011 uprisings were primarily framed in reference to a common belonging to the Arab world.<sup>35</sup>

### **3. Global militarism versus regional dynamics of democratisation**

#### ***3.1. Foreign military bases : Preserving the “island of peace in an ocean of instability”***

Djibouti is a 23,000 km<sup>2</sup> State stuck between Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen, at one side of the Mandeb Strait. Since the very day of independence, France has engaged in a close military cooperation with Djibouti. According to military agreements - renewed in 2011 - France remains responsible for the territorial integrity of Djibouti.<sup>36</sup> The logrolling is nothing less than the biggest french oversea military base. French military officials consider it as a “key-point” due to its geographic position edging the Red Sea. From a strategic perspective, the French “cinquième régiment interarmes d’Outre-Mer” is able to project forces in the Sahel region and in the Middle East. This has been the case in recent French intervention in Central Republican Republic (Operation Sangaris).

In addition, military cooperation - not solely with Djibouti - contributes to the French status as a global power as Bruno Charbonneau argues.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, France has no interest in amending the *status quo* in Djibouti. Aly Verjee, professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, drew attention on a demonstration of 4.000 people in front of the national stadium. The day after this mobilisation, the French ambassador in Djibouti is said to have declared : “These local events don’t worry us. Terrorism, piracy, those are the real issues”.<sup>38</sup> The obsession of stability is thus conveyed by French security policy towards this state.

In the post 9-11 context, Djibouti is also pivotal point for US security policies in Africa and the Middle East. The US installed their only military base in the African continent, from where drones aiming at targeted strikes are launched. It is crucial for the US security interests, as defined

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<sup>31</sup> Jeune Afrique, “La finance islamique honore le président Ismaël Omar Guelleh”, September 11th 2017 <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/473326/economie/djibouti-la-finance-islamique-honore-le-president-ismael-omar-guelleh/>

<sup>32</sup> ROUAUD, Alain, “Pour une histoire des Arabes de Djibouti (1896-1977)”, Cahier d’Etudes Africaines, Vol.37, Cahier 146, La Corne dans tous ses États, 1997, pp.319-348

<sup>33</sup> IndexMundi, Djibouti demographic profile [http://www.indexmundi.com/djibouti/demographics\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/djibouti/demographics_profile.html)

<sup>34</sup> HOUMED SOULÉ, Aramis, “Le nationalisme afar moderne en Éthiopie” In :*Les Afar, la révolution éthiopienne et le régime du Derg (1974-1991)*, Centre français des études éthiopiennes, 2013

<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, Al-Jazeera classifies Djibouti as an “African country”. See “What will Djibouti’s election mean for stability?” April, 8th 2016

<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2016/04/djibouti-election-stability-160408190036312.html>

<sup>36</sup> Article 4, traité de coopération en matière de défense entre la République française et la République de Djibouti (ensemble trois annexes), signé à Paris le 21 décembre 2011

<sup>37</sup> CHARBONNEAU, Bruno, *France and the new imperialism : Security policy in Sub-saharan Africa*, Ashgate publishing, 2008, 202 p.

<sup>38</sup> This statement is reported by Ali VERJEE (op. cit.)



by President Bush and followed by President Obama to preserve a stable and loyal power. President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh has made stability an argument of his maintenance on power. He recalls his nation is an “island of peace in an ocean of instability”.<sup>39</sup> It is worth mentioning that the NATO has used Djibouti to deploy its operation Ocean Shield since 2009 against piracy. Furthermore, the European Union leads operation Atalante since 2008, thanks to Djiboutian facilities.

In the context of turmoils in Yemen, Trista Coloma thinks that Western diplomats do not want “Arabs to control the two sides of Bab el-Mandeb”. This would be an unacceptable vulnerability. Djibouti is indeed regarded as a strategic hub for economic flows imported from Asia to Europe. In 2015, Djibouti announced that it would harbour a chinese base with a potential capacity of 10,000 soldiers. The control of the Red Sea, from the Mandeb Strait to the Suez canal is of paramount importance, even more so since the project of New Silk Road was announced by Xi-Jinping.<sup>40</sup>

Now, even states such as Japan, Germany, Spain, Italy - with a culture of antimilitarism - have begun to settle in Djibouti. In 2016, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of a base. In this “scramble for Djibouti”, global militarism and the stability of the regime was perceived as necessary for the maintenance of global trade flows through the Middle East. At the domestic level, the presence of so many foreign contingents constitutes an “unusual resource curse”, to Jennifer Brass.<sup>41</sup> She argues that the geo-strategic position of Djibouti generates a rent from foreign military spendings.

### **3.2. A State at the corner of two regional dynamics**

Antwi-Boateng argues that among the external factors hindering the domino-effect of uprisings, the growing influence of China is a major difference between the Arab world and sub-saharan Africa. China has many assets, projects and political agreements with African states, including Djibouti.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the PRC maintains a certain distance from Middle Eastern affairs. In this regard, it appears that Djibouti shares more similarity with sub-saharan countries than Arab countries.

Irit Back explains that unlike MENA countries, sub-saharan Africa experienced a democratic wave in the 1990, following the Benin model of national conferences.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, this author highlights that the African Union is more committed to human right concerns than is the Arab

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<sup>39</sup> See his interview in SAINT-PROT, Charles, EL TIBI, Zeinab, *Djibouti : au coeur de la géopolitique de la corne de l'Afrique*, Observatoire d'études géopolitiques, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Le Figaro, “Les nouvelles routes de la soie : les chinois sortent Djibouti des sables”, August, 30th 2017 <http://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/2017/08/03/20002-20170803ARTFIG00187-les-nouvelles-routes-de-la-soie-les-chinois-sortent-djibouti-des-sables.php>

<sup>41</sup> BRASS, Jennifer, “Djibouti's Unusual Resource Curse.” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 46, n°4, 2008, pp. 523-45

<sup>42</sup> See also CHAPONNIÈRE, Jean-Raphaël, “L'aide chinoise à l'Afrique : origines, modalités et enjeux”, *L'Économie politique*, n°38, February 2008, pp. 7-28.

<sup>43</sup> BACK, Irit, “The Arab spring and sub-saharan Africa”, Tel Aviv Notes, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Vol.5, N°10, May, 26th 2011

See also BRATTON, Michael, “Arab uprisings : lessons from Africa”, April, United States Institute of Peace, 21st 2011 <https://www.usip.org/publications/2011/04/arab-uprisings-lessons-africa>

League. As a result, according to Irit Back, sub-saharan Africa had already experienced a certain opening of its political institutions. This discrepancy between dynamics in the Arab world and sub-saharan Africa may have hindered the diffusion of contestation. Osman Antwi-Boateng concludes that there might be a “lack of regional cohesiveness” between the Arab world and sub-saharan Africa. He points out the lack of studies on the spread of uprisings between different regional areas.

French political scientist Jean-François Bayart opens an interesting question on the relevance and the delineation of regional areas (MENA in particular).<sup>44</sup> He argues that it is impossible to divide perfectly the world into regional areas. He contests the geographical criterion as it is an artefact. He rejects the economic dynamics, MENA countries having limited economic integration. He opposes the cultural reification of the so-called “Arab world”. Eventually, Bayart calls for a sociological-historical approach of regional areas, which constitute a mere “useful fiction” for the analyst. But in the light of our reflection on 2011 uprisings, one may question the *usefulness* of considering Djibouti as an Arab country. Indeed, if one considers the arguments made by Antwi-Boateng, then Djibouti should be coded as a sub-saharan country in our analysis. Finally, it is worth noting that specialists of Djibouti are mostly attached to research centers focusing on Africa such as the *Observatoire de l’Afrique de l’Est*.<sup>45</sup>

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

In this essay, I intended to address the diffusion of Arab uprisings in Djibouti, building on Osman Antwi-Boateng’s work. The case of Djibouti may illustrate the limits of the domino-effect theory. Indeed, the obsession of stability singles out Djibouti in the Arab world. The use of disaster narrative, the widespread consumption of khat, and the minor influence of cultural pan-arabism have been internal factors hindering the spread uprisings. Besides, it is worth noting that Djibouti represents crucial stakes for a number of global powers, which acted in the sense of their main interest - namely stability.

Considering Antwi-Boateng’s article, it seems that Djibouti shares more political, economic, and social features with Chad, Sudan, Angola, and Cameroon than Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Paradoxically, Djibouti appears as a blind spot for both scholars working in African studies and those focusing on the Arab world. From a methodological standpoint, this study raises the question of the delineation of regional areas. With the benefits of hindsight, it may be prudent not to tackle regional areas as exceptional, nor to analyse these with peculiar considerations. On the contrary, it seems relevant to seek the “banalisation” of conceptual tools and to test their appropriateness in different situations, as this paper intended.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> BAYART, Jean-François, “Dessine-moi un MENA ! ou l’impossible définition des aires culturelles”, *Société politiques comparées*, 38, January-April 2016

<sup>45</sup> French Ministry of the Armed Forces, Directorate General for International Relations and Strategy, *Observatoire de l’Afrique de l’Est*  
<http://www.defense.gouv.fr/dgris/recherche-et-prospective/observatoires/observatoire-de-l-afrique-de-l-est>

<sup>46</sup> COULON, Christian, “L’exotisme peut-il être banal ? L’expérience de Politique africaine”, *Politique Africaine*, n° 65, 1995, pp. 77-95

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