Arab Diasporas in Geopolitical Spaces

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Imperial Contestation and the Making of Colonial Subjecthood in the Port of Djibouti (1919-1939)

Scholars of the Indian Ocean have recently made an active attempt to look at the translocal and transnational existence of Muslims in the western Indian Ocean and eastern coastal areas of Africa.¹ They have particularly tried to show how Muslims existed within a larger geographical impasse. Researchers have done this by examining Islamic discourses (Reese 2008, 2012), the presence of Islamic/diasporic networks (Bang 2003; Loimeier 2006) and the formation of cosmopolitan spaces (Simpson & Kress 2007; Miran 2009). Following this lead, the aim herein is to document the transnational existence of Arabs by focusing on the geopolitical contestation that occurred between empires during the interwar period in the Horn of Africa, particularly in the Côte française des Somalis, present-day Djibouti.

The colony of Djibouti was created in 1884 and constituted the only French colony in this part of sub-Saharan Africa (Thompson & Adolf 1968; Dubois 1997). Situated on the African side of the Gulf of Aden, opposite to Yemen and the British colony of Aden, Djibouti was bordered by Italian-controlled Eritrea to the north, the British colony of Somaliland to the south and Ethiopia in the west. The colony of Djibouti saw the in-migration of many Muslims from these regions. Having itself a large indigenous Muslim population, the 'Afar and the 'Issa Somali, the colony in addition hosted Muslims from British Somaliland and the colony of Eritrea. There were also a substantial number of Arab and Indian Muslims who settled in the colony. Most of these Muslims were Sunnī Muslims who followed the Shāfi' school of Islām.²

1. As an example, see the following works on Islam in Indian Ocean Africa by G. CAMPBELL (2007) and R. LOIMEIER & R. SEESEMAN (2006). The present article is a new study of the interwar years' underpinning issues discussed in the author's recent publication (BEZABEH 2016).
2. CHAMBRE DE COMMERCE DE DJIBOUTI (CCD), "Population de Djibouti", Services des renseignements commerciaux et de la colonisation, *Revue Coloniale*, July-August 1901, 19 (1), pp. 228-238.

This article shows the importance of geopolitics in the analysis of Muslim and Arab transnationalism in the Indian Ocean, and focuses exclusively on Arab Muslims in the territory.³ The Muslim Arabs of Djibouti were almost exclusively from present-day Yemen.⁴ They were Hadramīs from the region of Hadramawt, in what is now known as South Yemen. There were also men who came from the northern part of Yemen, from such places as Tai‘izz, Hudayda and Tihamā. Most of the Yemenis came to Djibouti because of economic opportunities that emerged following the creation of the colony in 1884, including the construction of the port of Djibouti and a railroad connecting Djibouti with the hinterland of Ethiopia, including a stop in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. In the early twentieth century, Yemenis coming from the area of Hadramawt were British subjects. But they were also living under the rule of the Qu‘aiti and Kathīrī sultanates, which were created in the late nineteenth century. Those from the northern regions were by and large the subjects of Imām Yahyā. Despite this differentiation, both Hadramīs and Yemenis of the colony presented themselves as “Arabs” and took joint action to demand their rights as we shall see further on in the correspondence cited. They were also members of the same association that represented the interests of the Arab population of the territory. In view of this, in this article I use the term “Arab” rather than “Hadramī” or “Yemenis”, both as a way to reflect self-identifications of the period and also to simplify the flow of discussion.

This article will present the history of French interaction with the Muslim population of its territory by largely basing itself on French colonial sources and American archives. The author fully acknowledges the weaknesses associated with these sources. Ideally, it would have been better to document the issue by basing the stories on local sources rather than the colonial and foreign national archives. The state of documentation in Djibouti, however, does not permit this, as there are very limited indigenous sources available. Although there are, in Djibouti, the personal archives of notable individuals, even this material does not shed light on the specific topic that this article aims to cover. The author has also found oral information regarding the subject covered to be very scant. The Arab population in present-day Djibouti is in the third and fourth generation and many key actors who were involved in the politics of the interwar period have not left documents resulting in their descendants’ unawareness of the details regarding their forefathers’ interaction with different colonial powers during

3. A number of studies have shown the geopolitical significance of Djibouti. This article aims to go beyond that and show how the Arabs of Djibouti were affected by geopolitical contestation that occurred during the interwar period. For studies that show the geopolitical significance of Djibouti see, for example, A. GASCON (2005).
4. Regarding the Yemenis of Djibouti, see A. ROUAUD (1997) and S. A. BEZABEH (2016).

the period under study. In view of this, despite the weaknesses, the colonial archives remain the only viable source that can be put to use in order to demonstrate the existence of the Arab community during the interwar period.

This article will present the historical materials in two sections. In the first section, the article describes the interaction of Muslim Arabs with the French authority from 1919, marking the end of World War I to 1934. The second section looks at events beginning from mid-1935 up to the start of World War II in 1939. In describing the interactions of Muslims with colonial authorities during these periods, this article will, in each case, first outline the relevant international and geopolitical dynamics.

1919-1929: Aspirations and Reform within a New World Order

At the international level, the year 1919 signals the end of WWI. It was in that year that the Paris Peace Conference, which set the terms for the punitive settlement with the defeated Central Powers, was conducted. It was also after this year that a new agenda regarding the nature of modern state sovereignty was discussed and brought to the forefront on the world stage. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States had introduced a particularly advanced perspective, outlining “the interests of populations” and “autonomous development” in his “Fourteen Points.”⁵ Developed from the Fourteen Points presented to Congress on 8 January 1918, his 11 February 1918 speech outlined sovereignty as conditioned by “self determination” and the “imperative principle of action”: “National aspirations must be respected; people may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. Self determination is not a mere phrase; it is an imperative principle of action.” Though applied to redesigning the borders of nation-states (Poland, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs (then, Yugoslavia), Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania...) to disintegrate the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman Empires, its impact fueled various other claims for sovereignty or independence from colonial authorities as a ripple effect. Subsequently referred to as Wilsonian sovereignty,⁶ it was affirmed that nations and minorities would only be incorporated in a state if they willingly accepted their incorporation. In many parts of the world, the Wilsonian principle of sovereignty led to the independence of previously oppressed peoples through the exercise of self-determination, resulting in the creation of new nations, but in Africa and in the Middle East, the mandate system was used under the League of Nations to ensure Britain, France, Belgium and Italy be allowed to control former German colonies and Ottoman Empire domains while agreeing on how to extend their own existing colonial territorial interests.

5. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/wilson14.asp>.

6. For an interesting discussion regarding Wilsonian sovereignty, see L. SMITH (2009).

In northeastern Africa and the Gulf of Aden, where Djibouti is located, 1919 and the years that followed were marked by territorial reconfiguration and imperial contestation. In that year, a street revolt erupted in Egypt leading to the mass demonstrations throughout the Spring known as the "1919 Revolution." Protesting the British-declared protectorate of 1914, these eventually resulted in the country's obtaining independence in 1922.⁷ To the south of Egypt, in the Horn of Africa, the European powers of France, Italy and the Britain competed for influence.⁸ The Italians sought to take Djibouti from the French in order to create an Italian East African empire, bringing Djibouti and Italy's other spheres of influence in Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, into a single territory.⁹ Ethiopia's independence was becoming a subject of negotiation as the country, the only independent African nation, sought entry into the League of Nations. Although firmly opposed by Italy, it was championed by France, which eventually succeeded in helping Ethiopia (Abyssinia) join the League of Nations in September of 1923.¹⁰ On the other side of the Gulf of Aden, in the original territories of the Arabs, a similar game was being played. After pushing out the Ottomans, who had controlled the northern part of Yemen since the mid-nineteenth century, Italy and the United Kingdom aimed to exert greater influence in the region.¹¹ The Italians backed Imām Yahyā who replaced the Ottomans and recognized Yemeni sovereignty and his rule in August of 1926.¹² The British, meanwhile, backed the 'Asīr state, which had been formed in 1906 by Sayyid Muhammad Ibn al-Idrisi. Following the departure of the Turkish authority, the 'Asīr state came into conflict with Imām Yahyā, who sought to expand the territory under his control.¹³

In the period under discussion, the above-mentioned wider developments, which are linked with post-WWI reconfiguration, became important in the interaction between the Arabs of Djibouti and the colonial powers. In Djibouti, the first sign of political revivalism occurred in 1919 when a Hadramī Arab by the name of al-Hājj Abdul Kadir 'Umar Bā Wāzīr sent a letter to the United States Consulate in Aden demanding independence for the eastern region of Ethiopia which was actually adjoining the colony

7. Regarding the 1919 Revolution and the eventual independence of Egypt, see S. BOTMAN (1991).

8. Aden American Consulate to the Secretary of State, "Present Interest and Relation of Great Britain, France and Italy in Abyssinia, 22 April 1919," in *Records of the Department of State relating to the internal affairs of Ethiopia (Abyssinia)*, Rol. I, Washington: National Archive and Record Service (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 22 April 1919).

9. *Ibid.*

10. On the political contestation that resulted from Ethiopia's attempt to enter into the League of Nations, see J. ALLAIN (2006).

11. Regarding European rivalry in the region during the interwar period, see J. BRADLEY (1976).

12. *Ibid.*

13. On the state of Asir, see A. K. BANG (1996).

of Djibouti. This was precisely the region identified as a French sphere of influence in a colonial agreement that was signed between the Great Britain, Italy and France in 1906.¹⁴ Al-Hājj Abdul Kadir ‘Umar Bā Wāzīr claimed to represent the Muslims of Ethiopia and wrote at length how the eastern part of Ethiopia, inhabited by ‘Afar and Somali Muslims, came to be included in the territory of modern Ethiopia.¹⁵ He wrote that this had happened through the expansion of the Christian Shāwa state¹⁶ led by Emperor Menelik II.¹⁷ He wrote of the repression that Muslims of this eastern territory faced after the annexation of the territory to the Christian Ethiopian state; it was claimed that the Muslim population fell from 830 million to just 18 million after incorporation.¹⁸ In view of this, the author demanded that President Woodrow Wilson support their independence from Ethiopia. They demanded proportional representation for the Muslim population; freedom of religion, access to education, freedom of assembly and association; the establishment of independent Muslim courts and the right to form Muslim militias.¹⁹

From the available documents of the time it is not clear whether or not these Muslims were also in contact with British and Italian powers in the region, and if these regional powers considered the demands of Bā Wāzīr writing in the name of all Ethiopian Muslims. The US consul of Aden, to whom the letter was addressed, was very supportive about the proposal. He wrote a series of letters to the State Department about the need to reform the political system of Ethiopia, which he considered as an urgent act within the framework of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, the Treaty of Versailles, and the Wilsonian form of sovereignty, self-determination, which was advocated henceforth. The consul proposed a Philippines-like sovereignty for Ethiopia in which Ethiopians would have a limited self-government until

14. Regarding this agreement, see P. CAMBON, E. GREY & A. DI SAX GIULIANO (1908).

15. American Consul of Aden to The Secretary of the State, “Suggestions as to the Possible Methods of Reforming Abyssinian Affairs”, with attached letter of Haj Abdul Kadir Ba Wazir, April 23, 1919, in *Records of the Department of State relating to the internal affairs of Ethiopia (Abyssinia), 1910-1929*, Rol. I, Washington: National Archive and Record Service (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 1919).

16. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Christian Shāwa state which, throughout the long history of Ethiopia occupied a marginal position in the Ethiopian empire, became the power base of the country as the nobilities of this region took control of the state machinery. Led by Emperor Menelik II who defeated the Italians in the Battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896, the Shāwa state expanded to incorporate regions that were not previously under the domain of the state of Ethiopia. The eastern region, with which Al-Hājj Abdul Kadir ‘Umar Bā Wāzīr was concerned, was predominantly inhabited by Muslims and was included in this process of expansion. For an excellent discussion regarding the expansion of the Ethiopian state during this period, see DONHAM & JAMES (1986).

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

they reached the stage of civilization where they were ready for full independence.²⁰ He noted that the French, based in Djibouti, advocated an approach based on negotiation while the British and Italians, he claimed, advocated a measure of force involving the occupation of Ethiopia. The consul characterized the French approach as being too soft and the British and Italian measure as too hard, as compared to what he was proposing. The proposal of Bā Wāzīr that he was asked to forward to Washington was a cause that he willingly supported in his writing to the State Department.

Following the 1919 appeal, an aspiration to an independent existence was formulated in 1927, although this time the demand was limited. Made in the city of Djibouti in 1927, the demand concerned itself with obtaining full citizenship rights and recognition for the Arab population of the territory.²¹ According to the system established by the French in Djibouti, Arabs were classified by the colonial authorities as “indigenous” rather than viewed as people belonging to a separate nation.²²

In the 1927 protests, the Yemenis opposed the lumping of the Arabs with the ‘Afar and Somali groups of the territory. While they shared a common religion, the Yemenis regarded the ‘Afar and Somali groups as their inferiors.²³ The timing of their demand could not have been better. The previous year, in 1926, Italy recognized the sovereignty of Imām Yaḥyā and granted independence to Yemen. The year 1927 also was a time when Imāma Yaḥyā had substantial control over the ‘Asīr region. When the Arabs of the territory demanded full citizenship rights, they pointed to the independence of Yemen. Despite the fact that the “independence” was only recognized by Italy, within the context of Anglo-Italian rivalry in Arabia, it becomes an important signpost. The Arabs wrote on 8 December 1927 to the colony’s governor:

The Arabs who reside in Djibouti form a distinct group and they are the citizens of a state that has a national government, which is not administered by an imperial power.

This state is the state of Yemen.

Since the War, Yemen forms an independent state, which is not placed under any power.

The country’s territorial integrity is guaranteed by international treaties. Its situation is the same as Abyssinian [Ethiopia] and no power can proclaim the annexation of its territory.

This shows that we actually enjoy a status, which does not have any analogy with those who are indigenous to the French Somaliland [Djibouti], because the status of the latter is subordinate to the will of the French government.²⁴

20. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE (22 April 1919), *op. cit.*

21. Jean La Franchi, Président du tribunal de première instance, to Monsieur le Président du tribunal supérieur, 21 July 1930. File: Affaire Barroignes, Farnines, Magistrats. ANOM 1AFF-POL 697 (ANOM 21 July 1930).

22. Regarding issues of citizenship in Djibouti, see S. BEZABEH (2011).

23. ANOM (21 July 1930), *op. cit.*

24. *Ibid.*

The territorial contestation and reforms that occurred after 1919, however, were not only linked to political aspirations expressed in a manner that was directly political. Post-1919 also coincided with the emergence of several Islamic reformist movements that sought to challenge the presence of colonial powers. They chose a much softer strategy that did not involve direct political demands, but which concerned itself with reviving the moral values of Muslims. The movements sought to eradicate practices that were considered un-Islamic or damaging to the Muslim community. The quasi-political and quasi-moralistic project, which was based on Islamic tradition, was organized through associations and cultural clubs throughout the Islamic world. In Egypt, for example, the Young Men's Muslim Association/YMMA (*Jam 'iyyat al-shubban al-muslimin*) was formed in 1922 by Muslims who were frustrated by the continued presence of British administrators and troops, despite the 1922 formal independence of Egypt from Britain.²⁵ Once it was formed, this type of association was replicated throughout the Arab world. Egypt also saw the establishment of the Muslim Brothers (*al-'Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*), whose ideas of Muslim unity spread to many parts of the Arab world. But Egypt was not the only place where associations with moralistic, pan-Arabic and Islamic ideas were being formed.

There was a similar trend in Aden, with the formation of the Arab Islamic Reform Club (*Nadi al-Islah al-'Arabi al-Islami*) by Muslims with a Salafist orientation. Presided over by personalities such as Aḥmad Muhammad al-Asnaj and Muhammad 'Ali Luqman, the club aimed at reviving the morals of the Muslims in Aden (Reese 2012: 71-75). In this quest, however, the club was not alone: it was part of a wider emergence of similar movements. In fact, according to Muhammad 'Ali Luqman, the opening of the club was inspired by 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Tha'alibi, a Tunisian personality who founded the anti-French, anti-colonial Al-Hizb Al-Hurr Ad-Dusturī party in 1921.

In Djibouti, the softer form of expressing and engaging in the revivalist movement emphasized Arab unity and the following of strict Islamic morality. This strategy was used to challenge not only imperial power but also to create a pan-Islamic and pan-Arabic unity that crossed colonial borders. In time, it came to have great importance to the Arab Muslims of the territory. In the colony of Djibouti, one of the early signs of revivalist Islam tied to pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism was the arrival of a blind Salafi shaykh in Djibouti in the 1920s. According to a French source, the blind shaykh of Aden came to the port of Djibouti in 1920 and started to advocate a Wahhābī form of Islam.²⁶ The French authorities asserted that this blind shaykh of Yemen was the first shaykh in the territory to advocate Wahhābīsm.²⁷ Indeed, whether this is true or not, the career of the blind shaykh,

25. Regarding the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), see S. BOTMAN (1991: 116).

26. L'évolution islamique à la Côte Française des Somalis. File: Note sur l'Islam en Afrique noire. ANOM CFS 4^e 2, 3, 4 (ANOM 1937).

27. *Ibid.*

from what we read in the French record, seems to have been short-lived. French documents inform us that the blind shaykh was initially sponsored by ‘Abd al-Karīm Dorani, an Arab whom the French kept under surveillance as they suspected him of advocating a Salafist perspective. But the blind shaykh only preached for a short while as his teaching was strongly opposed by the local shaykh.²⁸

Nonetheless, agitation for the reform and revival of Muslim morality in the region seems to have been an ongoing affair, and the events in Djibouti echoed movements that were present in places such as Aden. In Aden, the supposed moral decadence of Muslims was of concern to people like Aḥmad Muhammad al-Asnaj and Muhammad ‘Ali Luqman (Reese 2012). In Djibouti, this theme of moral decadence was picked up on by Hassan Bā Nabila, an Arab. Bā Nabila, member of a prominent Djibouti Arab family, wrote about what he considered the moral decay in the Muslim community in a letter from Saigon.²⁹ Bā Nabila described how in previous letters he had written about the problem of alcoholism and said that he now wanted to demonstrate the evils connected with prostitution. Bā Nabila believed that what set man apart for other animals was his ability to control his sexual desire. He described, at length, the various forms of sexually transmitted disease that were spread through sex outside marriage. He went on to argue that prostitution was the source of these sexual diseases and, hence, was at the root of all problems among Muslims in the territory. What is interesting is the direct, moralistic challenge that he presented to the colonial authorities. The colonial powers claimed, in part, to be occupying places such as Djibouti on the basis of their moral superiority and in order to bring enlightenment and civilization to the people they were colonizing. He wrote:

Is it in line with the principles of protecting, civilising powers to introduce and maintain alcoholism and prostitution in their colonies when they fight to curb them in their cities? Is it humane and logical that these powers tolerate this mortal danger contaminating their subjects throughout their lives with shameful diseases and condemning them to live as pariahs when their mission, surely, is to guide the less educated and the uncivilised in progress in order to increase their standard of living?!³⁰

In Djibouti, attempts to rejuvenate the morals of the Muslim community were not, however, limited to the activity and interventions of individuals such as the above-mentioned Bā Nabila. In the 1930s, this individual effort was replaced with a more organized approach, including the formation of the first Islamic association. The Association de Bienfaisance Islamique was founded on February 10, 1930 (10 Chaban 1348) by seven prominent

28. *Ibid.*

29. Ali Bā Nabila to Muslims of Djibouti, December 1920, Saigon. File: “Correspondance des opérateurs de Djibouti (8 January 1907 to 17 June 1957).” Box: “Correspondance des Opérateurs Économiques de 1907 à 1957” (CCD 1920).

30. *Ibid.*

Arab merchants and three other local people.³¹ Headed by the Arab merchant Ahmed Ben Ahmed, the association sought to support fellow Muslims, particularly during the deaths of loved ones and associated funeral ceremonies.³² Although this was the stated goal, the association was also involved in a moralistic endeavor aimed at eradicating social evil. One theme that preoccupied the association was the same one identified by Bā Nabila: prostitution. Shortly after it was founded, the organization constructed houses on the outskirts of Djibouti where prostitutes would be lodged.³³ The houses were built for a cost of 5,583.75 francs. The idea was that all prostitutes would be restricted to living there, the neighborhood serving as a sort of reserve or enclosure.³⁴ In so doing, the association hoped to restrain its members from the evils of promiscuity.³⁵

To summarize, we saw in this section the creation of a new global order linked with territorial reconfiguration. Indeed, Yemenis used the opportunities raised by this global initiative to demand greater political rights. Awareness of and a demand for these new political rights were linked to the geopolitics playing out in the region and across the world. Thus, at the beginning of the post-WWI period we saw how Arabs drew on Wilsonian notions of self-determination and sovereignty to demand an independent Islamic sovereignty in eastern Ethiopia. In making this demand, however, they were not just playing on the new Wilsonian sovereignty principle but also on the 1906 colonial agreement that made the eastern part of Ethiopia a French sphere of influence. Subsequently, their attempt was again to use the opportunity raised by the Italo-British rivalry in southern Arabia.

As we have seen, this was a good opportunity to advance a claim for an independent juridico-political existence in Djibouti. This was not, however, the only event that occurred in the 1920s. Arabs in Djibouti also engaged in a softer form of politics based on raising the morals of Muslims for the purpose of ridding the region of the colonial powers. This endeavor was not an isolated event but was connected and responded to the wider presence of western empires. Organized under the banner of associations and clubs, this movement had a pan-Islamic and pan-Arabic ideology. In the middle part of the 1930s, as will be discussed in the next sections, these groups mobilized for more political activities, including the raising of funds

31. The names of the founders are Ahmed Ben Ahmed, Ali Coubeche, Hassan Dorani, Nadj Mohamed, Salem Abdelah Mooti, Abdourkhan Dorani, Cheikh Omar Ba Zara, Rached Dallab Hay, Mohamed Delleitah, and Hadj Hussein Nour.

32. *Approbation de Statut, Le Président du Comité*, 10 December 1930, File: Association de Bienfaisance Islamique; *Règlement de L'Association Islamique de Bienfaisance à Djibouti*. File: Association de Bienfaisance Islamique. ANOM 4° 8-9 (ANOM 1930).

33. *Le Comité de L'Association Islamique de Bienfaisance à son Excellence Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Côte Française des Somalis*, 5 January 1931. File: Association de Bienfaisance Islamique. ANOM 4° 8-9 (ANOM 1931).

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

to support the Muslim community. Thus, from this section it is clear that geopolitical maneuvers impacted the lives of Muslims Arabs in Djibouti. In the following section, the article looks at events in the decade before the start of World War II.

1930-1939: Arabs within the Context of pre-World War II Geopolitical Contestation

The nine years that preceded the start of WWII was a period during which the geopolitical game between the region's European powers was of paramount importance. Hitler's aggressive moves left no doubt in the minds of the French and British regarding the inevitability of war. Although war could not be avoided, the politicians of the two states tried to delay the start of the conflict, if not prevent it, by weakening Hitler's Germany. One such move was to bring Italy onto the side of the British and French.³⁶ In this regard, the French state, through Foreign Minister Pierre Laval, made an agreement that allowed the Italians a free hand in Abyssinia.³⁷ This move allowed the Italians to enter and assert control over Ethiopia, leading to the eventual occupation of Addis Ababa and the proclamation of Italian East Africa. Although the British did not explicitly give the Italians as free a hand as the French, they did eventually start to negotiate with the Italians over their sphere of influence in Ethiopia, namely the region of Lake Thana in northern Ethiopia, which is the source of the Blue Nile (Sbacchi 1997).

Both the British and the French, however, refused to automatically recognize the legitimacy of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia.³⁸ This not only irritated the Italians but made some within the government adopt a strategy of increasing efforts to strengthen Italy's position in the Middle East and destabilize that of the British and French, a tactic which they hoped would eventually lead to the two powers' recognition of the Italian ambition in the Horn of Africa.³⁹ They came also to support the revolt of the Arab population of Palestine who, frustrated by the increased immigration of Jews (which occurred with the tacit approval of the British, who were controlling the area), aimed to stage a street protest like the 1919 Egyptian protest that led to the ouster of the British (Arielli 2008: 188). The Italians actively financed and supported the Palestinian revolt. This was consistent with Italian foreign policy that sought to weaken the role of the British in the region, and pressure Britain into recognizing Italy's imperial ambitions in the Horn of Africa and in the Middle East.

36. Regarding the diplomatic maneuvers of the time, see A. SBACCHI (1997).

37. On the agreement between Laval and the Italians, see G. B. STRANG (2001).

38. *Ibid.*

39. On Italian propaganda, see M. A. WILLIAMS (2006). For an excellent discussion of the link between Italy propaganda in the Middle East and its ambition of colonizing Ethiopia, see H. ERLICH (1994).

At the core of the geopolitical game played by the international powers was the threat of war in Europe. The balancing act needed to either delay the start of the war, or prevent its outbreak, had an immediate impact on Muslims in the region. In Cairo and Aden, among other places, Arab intellectuals were pro-Ethiopia, much to the relief of the French colonial authorities in Djibouti.⁴⁰ But there were other voices, as well. In Cairo, the Lebanese historian Amir Shakib Arslān spread an Islamist, pro-Italian and anti-Ethiopian ideology that called for preservation of the Ottoman Empire. There were also many publications that supported an Italian presence in the region (Erlich 2002: 111-112). In Italian-controlled territory, the pro-Italy position, which affirmed Italy's friendship with Muslims and Arabs in the Middle East, was naturally more pronounced and explicit. In neighboring Ethiopia, which fell under Italian control in 1936, the fascist regime was quick to organize a pro-Italian campaign. That same year, seven Arabs were made to write a pro-Italian article in the newly founded Italian journal *Giornale di Addis Ababa*.⁴¹ Subsequently, Arabs living in Addis Ababa were forced to take part in a pro-Italian demonstration that marched to the palace to express support for Italy's policies towards Arabs and Muslims.⁴² In March 1937, the Duce himself went to Tripoli, Libya, to express Italy's pro-Muslim stance. Waving a sword of Islam presented to him during his visit, Benito Mussolini said that "fascist Italy intends to guarantee the 'Muslim population' of Libya and Ethiopia peace, justice, welfare, the respect of the laws of the Prophet, and wishes to show its sympathy to Islam and the Muslims of the entire world" (Allievi 1996: 183).

The French authorities in Djibouti grew increasingly concerned about Italy's involvement in the Middle East, including the support for Italy from Muslims with a Salafist orientation. As we saw earlier, Italy had long sought to take control of Djibouti. The fact that Italy was now in neighboring Ethiopia, agitating amongst the Arab and Muslims of that country, was seen as a direct threat to French colonial rule. To make matters worse, some of the Djibouti Arab Muslims whom the French had identified as having Salafist sympathies were organizing in support of the Palestinian revolt. Italy was seen to have a hand in the revolt, using the Palestinian case in a bid to strengthen its position in the Middle East and create a fascist empire in East Africa.

In June 1936, instigated and encouraged by the Arab Club of Djibouti and particularly by one the wealthiest Arabs of the territory, 'Alī Coubeche, Djibouti Arabs and Muslims signed a petition in support of the Arabs and

40. On the pro-Ethiopian stance in Cairo, see H. ERLICH (2002). On the pro-Ethiopian stance in Aden, see S. REES (2008).

41. From H. M. Consul to Secretary of State of Foreign Affairs, Memorandum and Enclosure: Italian Muslim Policy, 18 August 1936. FO/371.20202 (BRITISH FOREIGN OFFICE RECORD 18 August 1936).

42. *Ibid.*

their revolt in Palestine.⁴³ The Arab Club raised money that was to be sent to Al Ganah Al Makrazyah Li Aanat Mankoubin Falastine, an organization established to help families affected by the revolt.⁴⁴ As part of its fundraising, the Arab club of Djibouti sold pamphlets on the streets of Djibouti. These political activities sent a shockwave through the French colonial authority. The governor ordered the cancelation of all fundraising and ordered the arrest of anyone found selling pamphlets in the street, an order that led to the arrest of two youths who were members of the Arab Club of Djibouti.⁴⁵

This, however, was not the only alarming act that the French authorities had witnessed. Among the most influential Arabs in Djibouti was 'Abd al-Karīm Dorani. In the 1920s, Dorani was accused of sponsoring the blind Shaykh of Aden to visit Djibouti. Dorani was also, at that time, the leader of the Arab Club of Djibouti, and enjoyed good relations with regional personalities known for their anti-colonial and Salafist views, often arranging their stays in Djibouti. In January 1936, Dorani boarded the vessel Chenonceau to receive 'Abd al-Hamīd Sa'īd Bey, a known Salafist, who was President of Egypt's Red Crescent Society, and not only organized a conference at which he spoke but allowed him to stay in his house.⁴⁶ All of this was viewed with suspicion by the French. To make matters worse, Dorani shortly afterwards received Aḥmad Muhammad al-Asnaj, the president of the Arab Islamic Reform Club, which, as mentioned previously, was formed in the 1920s with a Salafist/reformist agenda.⁴⁷ During al-Asnaj's January 1936 visit, Dorani again organized a conference at which al-Asnaj was to speak. The conference, held on 17 January, was remembered for its anti-colonial rhetoric.⁴⁸ Present at the event were the richest and most influential Arabs in the territory, including 'Alī Coubeche, Salīm Mouti, Bā Zar'a and Sa'īd Ahmed. At the conference, al-Asnaj defended the cause of pan-Islamism and called for the colony's young people to be organized in support of the cause. He also spoke of the need for constant agitation, claiming that they had been able to force the British authority in Aden to include a Qur'ānic class in the curriculum through this tactic.⁴⁹

For the French, these invitations and conferences were a clear sign of the presence of an underground pan-Islamic organization in Djibouti. They

43. Le Gouverneur de la Côte française des Somalis et dépendances A. Annet à Monsieur l'administrateur Commandant le cercle de Djibouti, 16 June 1936. File: Note sur L'Islam en Afrique noire. ANOM, CFS 4^e 2, 3, 4 (ANOM 16 June 1936).

44. Le Commissaire de Police de Djibouti to Monsieur le Gouverneur de la Côte Française des Somalis (sous couvert de M. le Commandant de cercle), A/S Papiers vendues en ville, 9 June 1936. File: Note sur L'Islam en Afrique noire. ANOM, CFS 4^e 2, 3, 4 (ANOM 9 June 1936).

45. ANOM 16 June 1936, *op. cit.*

46. ANOM 9 June 1936, *op. cit.*

47. *Ibid.*

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*

suspected that Dorani was the leader of the organization, which they claimed was financed by some of territory's wealthy Arab merchants, including 'Alī Coubeche, Sālim Muṭī', Bā Zar'a and Sayf Sa'īd Muhammad.⁵⁰ To curb their activities, the security service stepped up their surveillance. They also decided that Dorani should be expelled from the territory if he continued to facilitate activists spreading a pan-Arab, pan-Islamic ideology.⁵¹

The reaction of the French to the activities that occurred in their territories during the 1930s was understandable given the Italian plan that involved creating an East African empire by sowing agitation in the Middle East. The French response was not only limited to surveillance and monitoring of dissidents, since they produced their own counter-propaganda in order to defend their privilege in Djibouti and curb the influence of the Italians.

Among their efforts, they encouraged Djibouti's Muslims to make an anti-Italian demonstration, following a series of demonstrations staged by the Italians. The protest was held one year after the Ethiopian demonstration. It is to be remembered that during Mussolini's visit to Tripoli during the month of Ramadan in 1937, following a prayer, he had theatrically waved the sword of Islam. The demonstrators, who were Arabs and Somali Muslims living in the territory, declared their unwavering support for France and their recognition of Djibouti as a French territory. The French journal *Correspondance d'Orient* described the demonstration:

After the great prayer, notables and Sheiks from the tribes of Dankils, Somalis, and Arabs, came in a single procession at the Government Palace and requested the head of the colony to firmly inform the Colonial Secretary and the government regarding the unwavering commitment of the population to France; the Cadi of Djibouti has declared that France was an ally and supporter of Islam, and that it is much better than the Duce's statement proclaiming itself on the African soil as "Sword of Islam." The Ethiopians have well realized that if he came to them with a sword in his hand it was the sword of Rome and this did not represent anything good for Islam, while on the other hand France has always been the protector of the faithful of this religion.⁵²

The demonstration organized in Djibouti was a tactic of pure propaganda on the part of the French government. But the allusion to France as the real protector of Islam was something that should be noted in order to understand the position of the Muslims who were caught up in the geopolitics of the era. France, like Italy, had presented itself as a Muslim power long before Italian invasion.⁵³ French civilization and power, it was asserted, was also Muslim as France's empire included a large number of Muslims.

50. *Ibid.*

51. *Ibid.*

52. "Une manifestation musulmane significative," *Correspondance d'Orient*, December 1937, p. 560.

53. Regarding the self-characterization of France as a Muslim power ("*puissance musulmane*"), see D. ROBINSON (1999).

Following on from this logic, France saw itself as a protector of the religion of Islam and its followers.

In the colonial assessment of the state of Muslims, in the context of Italian propaganda in 1938, this theme of France being a Muslim power was a given. The report condemned the Italians for being the only outsider force exerting a bad influence on the Muslims of Djibouti. It goes on to describe how the prevalent social order among Muslims in Djibouti had been disrupted by the nepotism of the indigenous people and a prevailing mood of reform, in which young men aspired to liberate themselves from all constraints.⁵⁴ The report recommended that the colonial authority put everyone in his place, moderate the extreme momentums and reduce resistance.⁵⁵ They should do this, the report stated, as in a Muslim country one has to act in a very firm manner.⁵⁶ In 1938, the French authorities' use of a firm hand and maintenance of the social status quo was not seen as a new policy. Rather, it was just a continuation of France's traditional role as a Muslim power guiding its Muslim population. We read: "It is legitimate to declare in the face of the world that France is a Great Muslim power. Despite some few errors she is among the few countries for understanding and guiding Islam toward a progress."⁵⁷

The colonial subjecthood of Arab Muslims was, therefore, something that was embedded in the imperial framework and referenced in the rhetoric these empires presented, as evidenced in the above quote. In neighboring Ethiopia the Arabs were pawns in the hands of the Italians, while in Djibouti they were equally under an imperial framework, the rulers of which also claimed to be a Muslim power. This existence was not a very easy one as these Arabs formally belonged or were attached to different colonial powers. As Muslims, they aspired to unity and independence that, as we observed, was expressed in the 1920s through demands for Wilsonian sovereignty. Yet they were the subjects of Britain, Italy and France. For the colonial powers, which sought to use the Yemenis in the ongoing geopolitical game, they were, however, Muslim. This fact of being Muslim on the one hand and a subject of colonial power with a specific and formal obligation of attachment required a great deal of juggling.

The materials from Djibouti found in the French archive do not tell us what it meant to be an Italian Muslim subject in Djibouti during the demonstration, a demonstration organized by a French power which, at the same time, was claiming to be the protector of Muslims. The archival material on the demonstration held in Addis Ababa however reveals the conflicted experiences of Arabs who were the formal subjects of an enemy

54. *L'évolution Islamique à la Côte Française des Somalis*, 1938. File: Association de Bienfaisance Islamique. ANOM, CFS 4^e 8-9 (ANOM 1938).

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.* Author's translation.

nation, but who were also involved in Muslim politics that required contact with a colonizing power engaged in wider geopolitical considerations.

During the Addis Ababa demonstration, many of the protesters, including the chief representative of the Arabs, were Arab Muslims who were also British subjects. The seven Arabs who wrote the original letter in December 1927 were British subjects, as were some of the Arab representatives in the palace. The fact that they organized a pro-Italian demonstration was something that had to be explained to the British authorities in Ethiopia. This task fell to Sayyid Muhammad al-Mihdār, the main Arab representative at that time. Following the demonstration, al-Mihdār went to the British legation to explain their actions. According to the British report of the meeting, al-Mihdār apologized for the protest but explained that they had been put in a difficult position because of the Italian occupation. The British officer in Addis Ababa, who had received al-Mihdār, reported:

Although he is a rugged old man, he nearly broke down, explaining how difficult their position was, loyal to Great Britain as they were, with spies everywhere ready to denounce them to Italian authorities for disloyalty to Italy. "When I leave you know," he ended, "I shall be stopped at the legation gates and cross-questioned about my business here with you. But rather than neglect, in future, my duty to the British government, I will gladly go to prison, and deem it an honour."⁵⁸

From this narrative, it is clear that being Muslim was a very complicated affair. The Muslims of Djibouti had aspired to become independent. They expressed this in political terms, but were also engaged in a strategy aimed at liberating the Muslim from within by renewing his sense of morality. In spite of their aspirations and desires, they nevertheless were caught up in the geopolitical games of the European colonial powers. In this, their identity as Muslims was important, as were their alliances with the different powers.

The post-WWI period, which started in 1919 with the signing of the Versailles Peace Treaty, ended in 1939 when Germany invaded Poland. This also brought to an end the diplomatic campaigns between Italy, France and Britain regarding the recognition of Italy's occupation of Ethiopia. On 29 November 1938, France finally recognized Italy's control of Ethiopia. France's Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier, accredited André François-Poncet as France's Ambassador to the King of Italy and Emperor of Ethiopia (Sbacchi 1997: 252). This recognition, however, was too little and too late. Vis-à-vis the French, the Italians by 1938 were not only interested in the recognition of

58. BRITISH FOREIGN OFFICE RECORD (18 August 1936), *op. cit.*

their control of Ethiopia: they also asserted their colonial right to Djibouti, Tunisia, Nice, Savoy and Corsica. By 1940, the government of Daladier was prepared to hand over Djibouti to the Italians, who now controlled Ethiopia, Eritrea and Italian Somaliland as one territory (*ibid.*: 253). The effect this had on the Arab Muslims of Djibouti is, regrettably, beyond the scope of this short article.

Although we might be curious to know more about what happened to the Arabs after 1939, the interwar period has provided ample evidence to demonstrate how the colonial subjecthood of the Arab Muslims of Djibouti was constituted. We learned that although the Arabs were resident in the geographically bounded locality of the colony of Djibouti, the geographical scale of their existence went beyond the immediate geography of the colony. Their interactions with France were shaped by the dynamics of the wider geopolitical situation, which had introduced influences originating from distant geographical spaces. Among those influences were the United States, with its Wilsonian notion of sovereignty; post-WWI Europe, with the competition between states for power; and unfolding events in Palestine, Egypt, Yemen and Ethiopia. This wider context was of importance for Djibouti Muslims and the French colonial authority that was interacting with them.

Through the analysis of French colonial documents, this article has shown that the Muslim Arab diaspora in the Indian Ocean port space has been shaped by wider geopolitical concerns and interactions, rather than a one-to-one interaction with the colonial power that dominated a particular geographically defined region such as the territory of Djibouti. It is indeed much easier to analyze the colonial policy of x or y colonial power in a specific colony without taking into account international relations and geopolitical factors. Looking at geopolitical issues in the formation of this specific interaction poses challenges for the researcher but provides a more in-depth understanding.

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that imperial geopolitical contestations were important for the transnational existence of Muslim diasporas of Djibouti during the interwar years (1919-1939). The author examines global geopolitical processes as part of his analysis of diasporic formation in the region. Contemporary studies of the Indian Ocean have viewed diasporas as creating connections between Oceanic systems and focused on discourses, networks, genealogy and cosmopolitanism to explain transnational existence. While the study of diasporas through these lenses is a legitimate point of departure, this article shows how geopolitical contestations at the global level place the region's Muslim community in a different and broader geographical scale of existence. This article examines how Arab Muslim diasporas adopted the language of empires to express political aspirations. It also demonstrates how, through the formation of associations, diasporas engaged with the geopolitical game between competing European colonial powers. Because members of Arab Muslim diasporas were not free agents, living as they were under colonial occupation, geopolitical contestations of empire structured the lives of Muslim Arabs in colonial Djibouti.

RÉSUMÉ

Diasporas arabes dans des espaces géopolitiques. Contestation impériale et création d'une subjectivité coloniale au Port de Djibouti (1919-1939). — Cet article suggère que les contestations géopolitiques des empires avaient de l'importance pour l'existence transnationale des diasporas musulmanes à Djibouti pendant l'Entre-deux-guerres (1919-1939). L'auteur étudie les processus géopolitiques internationaux dans son analyse des formations diasporiques de la région. Afin de décrire leur existence transnationale, des chercheurs contemporains de la région de l'Océan indien considèrent que les diasporas créaient des liens entre les différents systèmes océaniques par leurs

discours, réseaux, généalogies et leur cosmopolitanisme. Alors que l'étude des diasporas à travers ces optiques constitue un point de départ légitime, cet article démontre comment les contestations géopolitiques au niveau mondial finissaient par situer la communauté musulmane de la région au sein d'une échelle d'existence à la fois différente et plus large. Cet article analyse comment les diasporas arabo-musulmanes adoptaient le langage des empires afin d'exprimer leurs aspirations politiques. D'ailleurs, en établissant des associations, les diasporas s'engageaient dans le jeu géopolitique entre les puissances coloniales européennes concurrentes. Parce que les membres de ces communautés n'étaient pas des « agents libres », vivant sous l'occupation coloniale, les contestations géopolitiques des empires structuraient les vies des diasporas arabo-musulmanes à Djibouti sous le colonialisme.

Keywords/*Mots-clés* : Djibouti, Indian Ocean, Arab diasporas, colonial subjecthood, geopolitics, Islam/*Djibouti, Océan indien, diasporas arabes, subjectivité coloniale, géopolitique, islam.*