

## **The Indispensable Partner: Why Djibouti's Reliability is the Bedrock, Not the Barrier, to Ethiopia's Rise**

By Naguib Ali Taher, March 13, 2026

Samiya Mohammed's recent analysis in the Horn Review presents a critical, yet fundamentally flawed, interpretation of the Djibouti-Ethiopia relationship. The author paints a picture of Djibouti as a cynical "toll collector," strategically manipulating its larger neighbor to preserve a supposed monopoly. This narrative, while provocative, gets the story exactly backwards. Far from being a barrier to Ethiopia's progress, Djibouti's consistent reliability and massive investment in shared infrastructure have been the very foundation upon which Ethiopia's modern economy has been built. A clear-eyed look at the history and the current reality reveals that Djibouti is not a problem to be solved, but the indispensable partner securing Ethiopia's rise and the prosperity of the entire Horn.

To characterize Djibouti's engagement with Ethiopia as a calculated strategy of exploitation is to disregard the foundational role this small nation has played in its neighbor's economic survival. Following Eritrea's independence, Ethiopia found itself landlocked and urgently seeking a reliable gateway to international markets. At that critical juncture, Djibouti—a young nation with limited resources—made the strategic decision to invest heavily in port infrastructure capable of handling not only its own modest needs but the enormous volume of Ethiopian trade. This was not the act of a captor seeking to ensnare a dependent partner; it was a monumental demonstration of regional solidarity and economic foresight. For decades, this corridor has functioned not because of coercion, but because of the steady, professional management of Djibouti's ports and the thousands of trucks that move daily between our two countries.

The core thesis of Ms. Mohammed's argument rests on the premise that Djibouti views Ethiopia as a "captive resource" to be managed and monopolized. This assertion ignores a fundamental economic reality: Djibouti's prosperity is inextricably linked to Ethiopia's success. A weaker Ethiopia means less trade, fewer port calls, and a diminished economy for Djibouti. Conversely, a growing, industrializing Ethiopia generates exponentially more economic activity that benefits both nations. The suggestion that Djibouti harbors a "perverse disincentive" for its neighbor's growth defies basic economic logic. The fuel stored in Djiboutian depots for Ethiopian consumption, the billions of dollars in annual trade facilitated across our docks, and the integrated logistics networks that have developed over decades all testify to a partnership built on mutual benefit, not zero-sum calculation.

Ms. Mohammed cites Ethiopia's pursuit of alternative port access as a legitimate exercise of sovereign rights while simultaneously criticizing Djibouti's response to these diversification efforts. This selective framing reveals a troubling double standard. Djibouti has never disputed Ethiopia's sovereign right to seek multiple trade outlets. In fact, Djibouti has demonstrated its commitment to supporting this goal through tangible action. The development and promotion of alternative ports such as Tadjoura does not represent a "tactical correction" designed to appease an aggrieved patron, as the article suggests. Rather, it reflects Djibouti's proactive effort to grow alongside its partner by offering additional options within the framework of a trusted bilateral relationship. This is the behavior of a forward-thinking ally, not a threatened monopolist seeking to preserve its grip.

The accusation of "flip-flop diplomacy" reaches its most misleading expression in the

treatment of Djibouti's engagement with Egypt. Ms. Mohammed points to the December 2025 Green Port Solar Project at Doraleh—a 23-megawatt solar installation—as evidence of alignment with an actor hostile to Ethiopian interests. This interpretation substitutes geopolitical paranoia for sober analysis. For any small nation, energy security constitutes a matter of national survival. While Djibouti gratefully receives approximately half its electricity from Ethiopian hydroelectric sources—a testament to the existing energy integration between our countries—prudent national policy requires diversification against all potential disruptions, whether technical, environmental, or geopolitical. The solar project with Egypt represents sound infrastructure planning, not diplomatic betrayal. To construe a renewable energy initiative as a hostile act is to see conflict where none exists and to demand that a sovereign state forfeit its right to energy security in the name of partnership.

Perhaps the most significant flaw in Ms. Mohammed's analysis lies in its vision of the future. She posits that Ethiopia's inevitable rise will ultimately marginalize Djibouti, rendering it a peripheral actor bypassed by new infrastructure corridors. This projection fundamentally misunderstands the economics of regional trade. A richer, more industrialized Ethiopia with diversified port options will generate dramatically higher trade volumes overall. Djibouti's ports, with their world-class infrastructure, strategic location along major shipping lanes, and decades of operational expertise, are ideally positioned to handle the largest share of this expanded traffic. Our role will evolve from exclusive gateway to premier gateway—a transition that secures rather than diminishes our economic future.

The path forward requires both nations to deepen their integration beyond the port relationship. This means joint investment in industrial zones along the corridor, coordinated development of value-added processing facilities, and full harmonization of regulatory frameworks to reduce transaction costs for traders on both sides. This vision of shared prosperity is precisely what Djibouti has consistently championed.

The symbiotic relationship between Djibouti and Ethiopia is not “downcast” but dynamic, not exploitative but mutually constitutive. It represents one of the most functional economic partnerships on the African continent, forged through decades of interdependence and pragmatic cooperation. While Ethiopia understandably seeks greater autonomy in its trade relationships, Djibouti remains its most reliable, efficient, and experienced partner. To characterize this anchor of regional stability as an obstacle to be overcome is to misunderstand both the geography that binds us and the history that has proven the value of our partnership. The real foundation for lasting prosperity lies not in casting blame or constructing alternative narratives of victimhood, but in building deliberately and confidently upon the unshakable framework our two nations have already created together.