Throughout our world, clean, potable water is an ever dwindling, always necessary, staple of human life. In the arena of international affairs, there is talk of a shift from conflict over “black gold” (oil) to conflict over “blue gold” (water). The dire need for water is perhaps most urgent in what is recognized by some as the hottest country in the world – Djibouti, on the Horn of Africa. One of the few peaceful nations in a turbulent region, Djibouti is bordered by Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia. It is also the location of America’s only military base in Africa, Camp Lemonier. Nevertheless, life-threatening inadequate access to water, in parts of the country, threatens Djibouti’s people and the country’s hard-earned peace.

Over the past decade, as tensions rose in the region, wide-spread droughts led the United Nations’ World Food Program to deliver frequent emergency food aid to rural populations in Djibouti and its surrounding countries. Mothers walk for miles every day to get water from the limited number of wells for their families. This water is never abundant and, sometimes, is contaminated or so salty that it is not even potable. The threat of thirst, disease, famine, and conflict knows no border.

Djibouti has two major ethnic groups, both pastoral nomads; the Issa in the more urbanized south and the Afar in the rural north. An Afar-led civil war erupted in the early 1990s, was partly settled in 1995, and then flared up again before being resolved in 2002 by negotiation. Since then there has been little violence in Djibouti, but Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia have been affected by significant criminal and terrorist attacks and cross-border violence. Tensions in Djibouti’s neighboring countries, however, threaten to disturb the balance. Still today, there are disputes over land and water sorely needed for human use and for livestock. Livestock are critical to the livelihood of the Afar people; they live on little else.

Djibouti’s challenges are further exacerbated by the influx of refugees from its war-torn neighbors. In recent years, as droughts have increased in frequency, people left destitute by the lack of rain and drying wells have been forced to move. In doing so, they usually give up their traditional lifestyles and migrate to the overcrowded capital. With an unemployment rate of approximately 60%, however, the overwhelming majority end up in growing urban slums. Sadly, it is the women and children who usually suffer the most.

While some NGOs are working on access to water on a national level, as much as half of Djibouti’s population does not have access to clean drinking water. This is a daunting challenge in a country where the average temperature is above 100°F Fahrenheit for much of the year. Even so, local communities are banding together to change their future. The “Rohati Association for the Development of Dorra” is wholly community-run. It operates out of its native-region, Dorra, in the Afar area of the Northeast. This is the driest district in the country. It is directly adjacent to Eritrea and Ethiopia – perhaps the most conflict-ridden place on Djibouti’s border. Unfazed by these difficulties, the Rohati Association is working to improve access to water so that more people can stay in the region. “Rohati” is a local version of the Arabic phrase, “Please come here.” To respond to the Rohati Association’s call, so that they may help others who seek water and a better life in this most difficult of places, would be an ideal Project for Peace.

I propose to work with the Rohati Association to construct cisterns and rehabilitate wells in the region of Dorra – specifically in the villages of Dorra, Moulhoule, and Balho. According
to the World Food Program in a 2006 study, only 15% of Djibouti’s wells have the proper measures to prevent contamination – therefore, such rehabilitation of wells, in addition to the creation of new cisterns, is crucial. The newly-constructed cisterns would make getting water easier for the nearby communities and the rehabilitated wells would provide safe water to those already dependent on them. These wells will help the residents avoid debilitating and even fatal health-concerns, like the cholera outbreak that claimed 8 victims in one of the Dorra region’s villages last year.

I have been to Djibouti three times over the past two years and my parents currently work with the U.S. Embassy there. Through this direct experience, I have seen the dire need for water, especially in the Dorra district. Last summer, I worked with rural women’s cooperatives in Djibouti to help them market and sell their goods in the capital city. As a result, I was able to work with people living in both the cities and rural areas and made numerous contacts that would be helpful in the completion of this project, while using my French language skills to communicate. The president of the Rohati Association, Mohammed Abdullah, who is also the “Okal”, or the community-elected traditional leader of the area, advocates this project. Both he and Deka Hassan, the Coordinator of Self-Help projects at the U.S. Embassy in Djibouti, are prepared to help me to complete the project. The Rohati Association has already located appropriate areas for the building of cisterns and has identified crucial wells that need rehabilitation. Because the entire project would take approximately four months to complete, I would work with Ms. Hassan to start the project in May, oversee its progress via status reports and direct dialogue with the Rohati Association and Ms. Hassan, and would arrive in Djibouti in late July to see through the end of the project. The Djiboutian government has, just this year, launched an initiative aimed at improving accessibility to water, especially in rural areas. Their commitment to this effort, coupled with local support, will increase the prospect for sustained maintenance of the well sites and cisterns.

The benefit of this project would be great. Access to clean drinking water would be given to the approximately 2,000 residents in the areas surrounding the proposed well and cistern sites. In addition, these sources of water would allow other nomads, their livestock, and, potentially, refugee populations to have periodic access to this precious resource. Using local labor for the completion of the project itself would also bring much needed jobs to the economically-depressed region helping to further ease tensions exacerbated by current water shortages. In selecting the teams to build the wells, we would make sure that they represent all those in the area, including those from backgrounds that were formerly in conflict. We will site the projects to benefit several groups and work with the Rohati Association to make sure that it extends its “Please come here” welcome to residents and nomads. In this way, the new cisterns and wells will become focal points of peace and hope for a better life in Dorra. Finally, success in this project would set a precedent for collaboration with local grassroots organizations which could later be built upon by existing NGOs in Djibouti and multilateral aid organizations to further improve the livelihoods of Djiboutians.

As well as directly benefiting the people of Djibouti, this Project for Peace would create lasting ties of friendship and understanding between the people of Djibouti and the people of the United States. In a predominantly Muslim country at the crossroads of the Middle East and Africa, there is no better time than now to create such cross-cultural, peace-making connections.

In effect, the new access to water would help create peaceful communities where conflict, drought, and uncertainty once reigned which would create a secure future for the people of Dorra and, by extension, the people of Djibouti.